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Thirst for connection: Self ecopsychology and addiction

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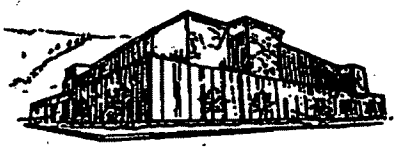

A Thirst for Connection:
Self, Ecopsychology, and Addiction

by

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This work began as an inquiry into the complex realm of human psychological connections to nature. The belief that people need the natural world not only physically, but also psychologically, came to me seven years ago during a solo experience backpacking in the forests of North Carolina. It was then that I realized how important a deep connection with nature is to me psychologically, and I began to wonder the extent to which that connection is also an evolved human requirement. Through my experiences, research, and ponderings, I have come to believe that it is, that humans need nature for their sanity and happiness just as much as for their physical well-being, and that thread is woven throughout my writing.

Through a personal journey into the role of the natural world in my development as a child, an adolescent, and an adult, I explore the belief that nature is essential to human happiness and growth. I touch on different avenues of the development of my relationship to nature, including observation, ecology, art, adventure, and teaching.

I then shift the focus to the mysteries behind human disconnections with nature. Using ecopsychology theory to drive my discussions, I explore the possibility that when people lose, or never develop, meaningful connections with human and natural communities, problems like depression and addictions can arise. I delve into this idea using a detailed personal narrative of my own battles with these problems. I then use my stories to begin to ask questions for others who struggle with alcohol abuse, especially two groups that are disproportionately affected by it, college students and Native American communities. While it may be easier to ignore the problems or to treat just the symptoms, I attempt to use ecopsychology theory to ask some difficult questions about the deep, root causes of alcohol abuse. And I make an offering of my ideas and my story, in hopes that it might help make the connection in others' minds, and eventually add to the healing and care for people and nature alike.

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Acknowledgements

The sensitivity to the suffering of the human and more-than-human communities around me is the main motivation behind this work, and I owe much of my ability to use my intuition and feel deeply to my parents. I also appreciate their undying belief in me and my causes and their support in all that I do, even when it seems crazy to them. I am thankful to my close friends for giving me support and advice when I need it, especially Ashley Parkinson, who was able to see in me things that I could not yet see for myself. Phil Condon and Tom Roy gave me the freedom to stray from the path a bit to begin to ask questions that were important to me, and Phil's patient guidance was what helped move along the writing when I couldn't see where to go. Annick Smith, whose uncensored remarks on one of these essays still keeps me smiling and thinking about how to be true to the art of personal narrative, was also unknowingly a great help with regard to the writing of this work. I am grateful to Marianne Spitzform, as she offered herself and her wisdom to me and helped me ask difficult questions and clarify my jumbled thoughts. Finally, a thousand thanks to the invisible faces of those who stand strong as a support system for me and for each other during the worst possible times, especially Paul, Rob, Ben, Renee, Bonnie, Keith, Dodo, and Bones.

Standing Alone in the Reeds: An Introduction

"I'm surprised that you love the outdoors so much," my mother said during a recent phone conversation. "When you were little, you used to complain all the time that it was too hot or too cold outside, and if you got even a little spot of dirt on you, you would come in and want to change clothes right away."

Some of our most famous environmental pioneers were rugged outdoors people, scaling large mountains, adventuring across continents, and preferring to live in solitude in still-wild regions. I consider myself an ardent environmentalist, but I have never been a boisterous nature-adventurer. As a child I was shy and somewhat cautious. My sense of reverence and care for nature originated from a quiet wonder and gentle observation of the world around me, rather than a reckless abandon or a driven, adventurous spirit.

I grew up in small towns in Tennessee, where much of my time outdoors was spent playing with my brothers in the backyard or exploring the forested lot beside our house. When I needed to get away from the chaos of two brothers, I walked into the woods to sit in my favorite spot. It was on a large fallen maple tree that lay in a small clearing where the sun penetrated the canopy of maples, oaks, and hickories. I sat there quietly, smelling the sun warm the brown leaves on the ground, and watching as sunlight separated into white rays and poured into the brown shade. I often took the opportunity to cry there when I needed to, a sensitive little girl giving herself over to the comfort of the forest.

I don't remember complaining about it being too hot or cold, nor do I remember changing clothes every time I got dirty. But I do remember happily kneeling in the grass and mud, molding and patting wet earth into little aluminum

pans, and then cutting the mud pies into pieces for my dolls. I often climbed the dogwood tree in the backyard because it was just the right size for my tiny legs and arms to reach the branches. I remember standing still in that tree and peering through the delicate, pink flower buds and pointed, veined leaves, out onto neatly manicured lawns in the little valley between steeply sloping backyards.

My parents' attitudes toward nature also influenced me. My mom has a love for birds, and she has always kept bird feeders filled with seed in the backyard within easy viewing distance from the house. She used to tell me and my brothers what kinds of birds we saw on the feeders, and she let us use dad's good binoculars to see them up close. I remember watching the daily scenes unfold around the feeders: red cardinals and blue jays squawking and raising their wings to compete for sunflower seeds, goldfinches and house finches hanging upside-down eating thistle seeds, and gray squirrels and rufous-sided towhees side-by-side, scratching around in the dirt below to eat up the seeds dropped during the struggles. Early mornings, we watched mourning doves line up across the bars on the jungle gym, and until college I thought they were actually named "morning doves."

One day when I was around five years old, my older brother Chris shot and killed a dove with a bee-bee gun he'd borrowed from a friend. The dove lay on the ground, perfectly fat and rounded, smooth gray wings still tight at its side. Its eye had a white membrane over it, and I studied the bird, trying to absorb the permanency of death. I felt the sense of impending doom that you feel when you know that you or one of your siblings has broken one of your parent's most fundamental rules. In my attempt to understand, I listened as mom explained to Chris that he had taken away the bird's life needlessly.

"Chris, I put out food for the birds every day, and that's why they're there all the time. They think our yard's a safe place to sit and eat, and I want to keep it that way." Her eyes were big and glassy, and her nose grew red, as it always does when she cries.

My dad is a wannabe river rat. He kept a large blue inflatable raft in the garage, ready to throw in the orange Volkswagen bus and head to the Harpeth River at a moment's notice. He is an Episcopal priest, and I remember summer days when he would shed his black uniform and white collar for a pair of twenty-year-old worn, ripped blue jean cutoffs and a light blue t-shirt that said *Ocoee River - I swam.* The shirt had several lines with boxes next to them for you to check off: *Grumpy, Broken Nose, Double Suck, Double Trouble, Diamond Splitter, Hell Hole.* His legs were long and tan, and he wore brown leather loafers with no socks as he milled around outside, tinkering with the cars or picking up sticks so they wouldn't get caught in the lawn mower.

One day he took my younger brother, Nathan, and me out onto the Harpeth River in the raft. The river was running high that day, and the waves washed Nathan's favorite t-shirt off the side of the raft. In an attempt to maintain my role as my little brother's hero, I jumped into the water and swam with the current toward the shirt. As I remember it, I grabbed the shirt, and as I turned to swim back toward the raft, I saw a water moccasin switching across the water's surface. I held my breath and went under, thinking that the snake wouldn't see me under there and would move on. When I came back up, I saw my dad rowing the raft toward me, both worry and excitement apparent on his face. The snake was nowhere in sight. Dad helped me back into the raft, and he gave me the "I'm impressed and proud of you, sweetie" look

that he used to give me. That look must have been a large part of what encouraged me to think for myself and to take risks even when I felt reluctant to do so.

Despite the river adventures and occasionally testing the reflexes of crawdads in the creek nearby our house, most of my risk-taking growing up was related to school or extracurricular activities. I never played any sports, nor did I care much for gym class, but I took the most difficult classes and immersed myself in extracurricular activities and clubs. My teenage rebellion emerged when I joined a group of smart, creative art and theater friends who encouraged me when I shaved my head, wore combat boots, and stubbornly refused to ever attend a football game or pep rally.

As a teenager, most of my time exploring the outdoors consisted of riding with a friend to the nearby state park after school to wade in the creek or walk the trails by the lake. He smoked cigarettes, and we talked about friends, music, and school. And sometimes a group of us would get together out there to swim in the creek when it ran high.

I guess it was already inside me, though, that unconscious recognition that my life is connected to the land I walk on, but I didn't yet know where that knowledge might take me. The longing to immerse myself in wildness had yet to hit me, but I remained true to my initial understanding of the importance of non-human nature.

Throughout high school, my interest in environmental issues continued to grow. To me it was a rights issue. I believed that all beings deserved to be cared for and treated respectfully by people. That belief never wavered. I did a project in high school government class exposing anti-environmental groups that posed as environmental conservation organizations. Such a project was unheard of in my small-town, southern high school. Environmental issues were never even mentioned

in the classroom, and my friends were not very environmentally-conscious. But somehow I knew that I wanted to dedicate my life to caring for the land.

I chose my college based on the strength of its Environmental Studies Department, in the early 90's, when it was not yet a common major. My freshman year, I took an introductory ecology class and fell in love with it, especially with the field research that we did in my school's three-hundred acre study site in rural Minnesota. But what I remember most about the experience is walking through a white forest of paper birches, coming to the muddy edge of the lake, and seeing my first osprey soaring above the water's surface.

Ecology turned out to be an intuitive science for me. It just seemed natural to think on the scale of large systems and interconnections. It also helped that my college advisor was great fun. He was a birder, and a crazy one. He kept stuffed specimens of waterfowl in his tiny office, their glass eyes open blindly to the world much past their time. Dr. Mark Davis, Mark as he preferred, took us out on numerous trips during Winter Ecology class, and he was responsible for making my first Minnesota winter a memorable one.

That January, our class saw numerous waterfowl, bald eagles, double-crested cormorants, and wild turkeys, none of which seemed to pay any mind to the frigid subzero world of ice and snow. Their determined little bodies kept right on moving, eating, flying, swimming, even when I felt that I might freeze right there in my boots watching them. There was something special about seeing such resilient creatures, and I gladly read about their life stories, watching as they crossed continents in my mind's eye.

My first car-camping trip was with Animal Ecology class the following year. Mark took us out in two school vans to Sand Lake, South Dakota, to go birding for

the weekend. I had to borrow my boyfriend's sleeping bag and share my roommate's tent, but I was happy to. It was a new adventure.

My first impression of the Great Plains still lingers in my memory. It was the flattest land I had ever seen, without a dot of green for miles. Just vast stretches of brown and gold grasses, water standing everywhere, birds going about their busy lives. Exotic-looking pronghorn antelope raced past our vans, acting as if humans had never existed. I felt as if I could wander the plains for weeks. The bigness of the sky was freeing to my imagination, the simplicity of the landscape comforting to my senses.

It was a flood year, and the birds loved it. That year they were not conscious of the enormous loss of wetlands in the "Prairie Pothole Region." They simply took advantage of what was there, what should have been there all along. Blackbirds shrieked from grass stalks, goldeneyes and coots wiggled and splashed, frogs came up out of the mud to reproduce. All was right with the world for them, while South and North Dakotans dealt with flooded homes and destroyed businesses in their already dying little towns. I felt compassion for the people who suffered losses due to the flood, but I couldn't help also being affected by the hectic, joyful energy of the animals. They know what to do in flood years; it is a normal part of their life histories. It is a normal part of ours also, but we have lost touch with the knowledge we had that allowed us to live in harmony with such occurrences.

On the ride home, Mark almost ran his fifteen-passenger van off the dirt road when he spotted a rarity standing in the reeds nearby. He belted out on the walkie-talkie to our van, "Pull over, pull over! There's something you have to see - HURRY!" The excitement snapped me out of my wetland daydream, and I stood to

see out the van windows. Someone opened the back of the van to get out their camera, and I jumped over the backseat to get out.

Our hearts racing and eyes scanning the grasses, we spotted it. It was an American Bittern, standing about two feet tall, brown-striped and as chubby as a cartoon animal, with its long beak pointing up to the sky. It was moving, swaying with the reeds, blending in with its surroundings. We took pictures, and I made sure to watch it awhile with just my eyes. I felt sad for it because it was trying so hard to become invisible as we all gawked at it from the road. But after a couple of minutes, we re-boarded the vans and left it alone in the plains of South Dakota.

Those field trips stand out in my mind because they were some of the only times I got out of the Twin Cities during my four school years there. Other than those rare trips and summer adventures to New England, the mountains of Tennessee, and a spring break trip to Texas, I was stuck in the cold, snowy, gray cities. I had no car, and I had to pile on layers and layers of wool, flannel, fleece, and down just to go outside most of the year. I remained buried in my books and under blankets to stay warm in my cold apartment in Saint Paul. I ate too much and steadily gained weight over the years. I felt increasingly trapped, tired, overextended, and isolated. I was shy and kept to myself and my two best friends, thinking that I didn't quite fit in somehow with my peers; they were more outdoorsy, rugged, stylish, hippieish, independent. I watched them in their extended networks of friends and felt more and more alone.

The cities gave little solace, not enough opportunities to connect with the non-human natural world. I grew depressed, and began feeling apathetic to the issues I had previously felt so strongly about championing. I thought there was no hope; people were hateful and greedy, and there were not enough of those of us who wanted

to change things. Cities boomed, and people hurried around within their concrete walls, busying themselves with their daily lives, completely unaware of the American Bitterns hidden away in the last remaining wetlands.

My last year in college, I was required to take on an internship. Somehwat apathetic as to what it would entail, I took the first one I found. It was with Como Park Zoo and Conservatory in Saint Paul, working in the education department. There I began to learn about environmental education from people who really believed in its ability to improve things. My stunted desire to work for change finally found an outlet: I researched and designed educational signage for the upcoming butterfly garden and native plant exhibits, and I assisted the instructors in teaching some classes.

The zoo was about one hundred years old. Although it had changed a lot from the days of tightly caged animals that were there purely for human entertainment, it was still distressing. I identified with some of the animals who had lived in their confined exhibits in the middle of the city for too long, so long some of them had just gone crazy.

The Kodiak Bear was the worst case. He would stand in his concrete bear den and shake his massive brown head from side to side, a nervous tic he'd acquired from decades in captivity. I felt as if I understood him, and I felt his sadness. I saw it as the sadness of the human world, too, the listless drone of daily life in a concrete zoo, far away from the world we are evolved to live in.

Other animals channeled their frustrations through anger. Casey, the silver-back gorilla, would wander around his sunken exhibit yard, eyeing the public suspiciously. But when he saw a familiar face of a zookeeper or zoo staff, he quickly reached down and pulled up a fistful of dirt and shit and slung it at that face. He'd

then jump up on a rock and pelt his chest with open palms, making a sharp popping noise. The public gasped, kids squealed, nervous laughter ensued. I remembered the story someone had told me about Casey when he was younger, how he had been light and strong enough to hook his fingers on the ledge of his enclosure and hoist himself up and out of it.

He did that one day when the zoo was closed, and he wandered all around the zoo, over to one of the food booths, and eventually back to his own yard, where he willingly jumped back down into it and never got out again. He had been looking for freedom, I guessed, working from the internal knowledge that the way he was living wasn't right somehow, and that there had to be more out there. When he realized there wasn't, just concrete and greasy food, he opted to go back to what he knew. I felt that way often, confined and trapped in a life that I knew somehow wasn't enough, wondering what else was out there.

Although it pained me to see some of the animals suffering, I also realized the reality that many of the animals at the zoo, like Casey, had to be there because they had been injured or raised by people and were no longer able to care for themselves in the wild.

"At least they have plenty of food and health care," Patty, one of the zookeepers told me one day as she cut up fruit for the flying foxes. "That's more than they would have in the wild, where they're no longer able to fend for themselves. Many of the animals also serve as samples of genetic diversity for those in wild populations that are now so small and inbred that they're at risk of becoming extinct."

The zoo animals had no idea they were being used as sacrifices for the health of their wild relatives. I wondered if they would have chosen that life, if they would have agreed to spend their lives in captivity for the greater good of the species.

The zoo was free to get into, so it attracted city kids that would take the bus there after school, because they had nowhere else to go or because it was a safe place to be. I saw that as a great opportunity to reach those young people, ones that didn't have the same chances for experiencing nature that I did growing up in more rural areas. Knowing how my own malleable child-mind grasped on to the subtleties that nature offered me, the unspoken messages of the earth that it needed help, I renewed my hope for a more respectful and mindful humankind through the idea of environmental education. I saw more hope in the natural curiosity and wonder of children than I had ever glimpsed in all my classes in environmental policy and economics.

I worked at the zoo the following summer, supervising teenage gardening volunteers and teaching zoo camps for younger kids. After college, I took a two-month Outward Bound course for future outdoor educators. During my time backpacking and living in the tangled forests of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina, I had a spiritual awakening. I came to realize how much feeling a deep connection with the natural world means to me spiritually, psychologically. I could see then that such a connection, an understanding of how my life fits into the larger living world, is an integral part of my psychological health. I did not know it at the time, but my realization that I need to feel a part of the natural world in order to be happy was one that would lead me to study the newly emerging field of ecopsychology.

Ecopsychology, as I understand it, is a field that attempts to combine themes of ecology and psychology. Ecopsychology stems from the idea that humans and nature are deeply connected, or are one in the same. And our society, as well as many others, tends to perpetuate the illusion that humans are somehow separate from or

better than the rest of the natural world. Our society removes us emotionally from nature by feeding us such ideas, and it keeps us physically from nature by boxing us in houses, offices, vehicles, and stores. We rarely know where our food comes from or the extent to which our food has been genetically-modified or sprayed with toxins. We no longer need to rely on our knowledge of our environments, their seasons and cycles, weather, plants, or animals for our daily survival. So we have lost touch with how much a part of nature we really are, and we begin to believe we are superior to all else. We get so caught up in our materialistic, consumption-obsessed world that we end up seeing nature as yet another thing to consume rather than a part of us - an extension of our bodies - that should be respected and appreciated.

This separation from non-human nature, or more-than-human nature, a term ecopsychologists often use, is harmful to both humans and to the rest of nature. We as a species have not actually evolved in the last two or three-hundred years, but our societies and lifestyles have changed dramatically from the nature and community-based lives we once led. We may not be mentally equipped to deal with living such different lifestyles.

Ecopsychology maintains that there was a gradual movement away from lives that were intricately tied to natural knowledge and experience, to lifestyles that require us to greatly alter or harm our environments for our own benefit. Our weaning from our natural surroundings and more harmonious lifestyles has caused a collective trauma to us as a species. We are sensitive beings, and although we may not be consciously aware of it all the time, our lack of knowledge and contact with more-than-human nature is harmful to us psychologically. And just as a traumatic experience can cause dissociation within the individual, possibly manifested through mental illnesses or addictions, the "original trauma" of our long-ago separation from

nature could be a major factor in our societal obsessions and addictions with unhealthy sex, over-consumption, and substance abuse.

Another main theory of ecopsychology is that the illusion that we are separate from or superior to the rest of nature causes us to abuse the natural world. We treat plants and animals, soil and trees, as things for our own use, rather than respecting their own integrity. This is not to say that we are not supposed to consume plants or even animals, but ecopsychology suggests that we should take a step back from the way that we presently ravage ecosystems and wipe out species from existence, not only for the health of more-than-human nature, but also for our own psychological well-being.

These patterns seem to feed on each other. We feel separated from nature, therefore we abuse it. And the more we mistreat our surroundings and each other, the more we psychologically separate ourselves from other beings.

Sometimes, though, we can see ourselves in zoo animals, caged up in our towns and cities, longing for something else that might be out there, unsure of what that something is. We can also see who we want to be when we take the time to look for it - a bittern, standing alone, swaying with the reeds, or a tree, rooted but branching out, supporting other life as it grows.

For several years after my ecopsychological awakening in the forest, I struggled with what it all meant to me and my daily life. I wanted desperately to feel a deep connection to my environment and to people around me. And I did connect with my world in a way, but I also fell prey to problems that ultimately caused a great disconnect in my life.

In the essays that follow, I explore both my experience with the more-than-human world and the depression and addictions that threatened to overtake me. In the

final essay, I discuss my understanding of ecopsychology and addiction through my experience and by telling the story of a local tragedy.

We as humans cannot expect to truly help others or to stop the needless destruction of nature without first caring for ourselves and working through our own problems. My hope for this work is that it might contribute to the healing of others, and to the respect for and protection of nature, through the telling of my story. This is just the beginning.

Sprouting Roots: A Growing Relationship to Plants

I remember tasting dandelions on my hands when I was eight years old. The sharp bitterness seemed a poison to me. Dandelions grew everywhere in our overgrown lawn in Tennessee, and I used to pick the sunburst-yellow flowers to put in my hair or to tie together, making a necklace for myself. At eight years old, I did not have much of an understanding of the complex relationship between people and plants. Food came to me in the form of chicken casseroles with cheese on top; medicine came in the form of chewable pink pills that tasted like chalky cherries and got stuck in my teeth.

My relationship with wild plants consisted of climbing the sturdy dogwood tree in the backyard or placing buttercups under my brother's chin to see the reflection on his skin. I remember forcing my younger brother to eat tree leaves, insisting that the large hickory tree in our backyard was where our mom foraged for the salad greens that we ate with carrots and ranch dressing. Even in college I had little intimate knowledge of wild plants; I considered myself more of an "animal person." I understood plants from an agricultural and ecological standpoint, but I had no *relationship* with them.

Currently, as a graduate student at the University of Montana, I work part-time in the school herbarium. The herbarium contains 130,000 plant specimens that are dried, pressed, mounted, and identified. I am constantly mounting pressed plants onto paper, often surprised by their still brilliant colors, and I imagine how they may have looked when they were in the process of growing and moving with the breeze. Most of the plants I mount were alive one or two years ago, but some of the plants stored in the herbarium date back 120 years. Recently, I pulled out a juniper branch from 1897.

It is pressed to the page with yellowed glue and mounting tape. Its once deep blue-green scaly leaves are now yellowed to chartreuse green. It still holds onto one raisinish purple berry. The scrolled, faded handwriting on the label says that it is from Andrews Ranch. It was plant specimen number 386 to be added to the herbarium.

Today I worked on mounting a box of 300 pressed plants. I was able to track the movement of the botanist who collected them, Arnold Tiehm, through the mountains and deserts of Nevada. He was in the Roberts Mountains on July 4, 2002, and in the Dogskin Mountains a month later. He worked with a female botanist in June and was off by himself again after a few weeks. He spent the entire summer traveling across Nevada, looking for plants, gathering plants, identifying and pressing plants. As I placed Arnold's treasures carefully on archival paper and glued the tiny maps and labels on the bottom of each page, I began to wonder how he would describe his connections to the plants he studies.

It wasn't until a few years after college that I began to develop my own relationship to plants. At the time, I was working as a teacher at an outdoor school in the Sandia Mountains in New Mexico. There I met a woman named Alicia, who began to introduce me to the local wildflowers, shrubs, and trees.

Alicia was a self-proclaimed Luddite, who lived in a tiny house in the South Valley of Albuquerque. She always wore the same thing: a short-sleeved, button down shirt with black work pants and awkwardly large shoes with spongy soles. She had short back hair and wore Buddy Holly glasses over her sweet, girlish face. Alicia had moved to New Mexico from New York years before because she was inspired by the medicinal plant books written by Michael Moore. She wanted to experience

firsthand the remarkable western desert plants that Moore described in such detail in his books. She wanted to learn to harvest them and make medicines with them.

After the students had left the outdoor school in the afternoons, Alicia and I would hike the less-traveled trails, carefully observing the plants of the area in preparation for writing a plant field guide for the school. She attempted to spark my interest by describing their edible and medicinal value, their ecology, and their cultural history. At first, I had planned to learn just enough to help with the plant guide and to share some with my students. I had never been particularly interested in plants, nor did I really understand "plant people."

On one of our early hikes, Alicia and I found watercress growing near a trickling mountain spring. It hesitantly dotted the muddy slope of the shallow pool created below the spring. The small, slightly pointed, round leaves stretched up from the stems and sat on top of the water. We picked some of the leaves, and she told me to try them. I put a few in my mouth, biting down on them with my front teeth, and then tasting the peppery heat with the tip of my tongue. How amazing it was that such an inconspicuous plant could have such intense flavor and personality! Alicia told me that watercress was a good wild plant to sample; it is safe to eat, nutritious, and tasty. After tasting the tiny plant, I made a mental note to point it out to my students the next day.

There were three thick-trunked juniper trees that grew beside the spring, in sharp contrast to the thinner junipers that grew elsewhere in the area. Most of the junipers there rarely grew thicker than ten inches in diameter. These old, fat trees were drinking water straight from the spring, and one had an overabundance of gin-scented berries. Alicia told me that the berries, though rather bitter in flavor, are effective when used as a tea to treat urinary infections. Though intrigued, I opted out

from tasting the frosty bluish-purple berries, as I had no medicinal need for them. Besides, I told her, I have a strong aversion to the taste of gin.

Farther up the trail, growing in between the sandstone and limestone rocks and boulders, Alicia and I found a small but important medicinal plant. Oregon grape, or *yerba de sangre*, grew in between the limestone rocks on the trail, its spiky red and green leaves reminding me of holly bushes that grew outside my childhood bedroom. Alicia told me that Oregon grape was used by local people as a blood tonic, and that it had detoxifying effects on the body. I later read that it also contains berberine, an active agent also found in goldenseal. Goldenseal and Oregon grape are effective antibiotics and stimulating to the immune system. The Oregon grape in the area rarely grew taller than six inches, and its leaves turned red in the fall. It is easy for someone to walk by the plant without noticing it, but now I always see it.

One plant that Alicia and I were not at all able to walk by without noticing grew in a shady, moist patch underneath Piñon Pine trees. I had noticed the plant before, not by its unremarkable lance-shaped leaves or its tiny white flowers, but because its often overpowering odor reminded me of smelly feet. I remember walking by the area before with a group of students trailing behind me, wondering how a fifth grader's feet could possibly smell so rank. Alicia informed me that the roots of the valerian could be used as a natural sedative. She said if you could stand the smell, the roots could be ground up and made into a tea to heal insomnia and to relieve pain. I pointed out that it could also be very useful to feed to particularly rambunctious students to make our jobs easier.

All of the plants I was learning about fascinated me, and I began to pass on my new knowledge and interest in the plants to my students. They loved hearing about the ones that they already recognized, like Piñon Pines, junipers, and yuccas. They

particularly liked it when I would mention how valerian smells like stinky feet and buffalo gourd like sweaty armpits. They laughed at the mention of usnea lichen, which I would call "old man's beard" and hold up to my chin. They grew hungry talking about the dishes their families made using piñon nuts and walking by fields of the fragrant chocolate flower. On mention of the possible use of hops in brewing beer, I would hear a chime of "cool," "awesome," and "tight, dude."

I began to gather watercress for salads and to rub the slimy sap of globe mallow on my cuts and scratches so that they would heal faster. I noticed when yuccas were flowering, when piñon nuts were ripe, and I smelled buffalo gourd, chocolate flowers, and juniper berries without even stepping off the trail to get close to them. I fell in love with fiery-orange Indian Paintbrush flowers and was inspired to tell the legend of Indian Paintbrush to my students.

The plants began to mean more to me than their roles in the larger ecosystem; they seemed to be taking on distinct personalities. I began sketching them, hoping to catch the subtle individuality of each plant that I had the privilege to see and touch and smell. By getting to know the plants more intimately, I also began to learn more about the animals that lived nearby but I never saw. I recognized new bear scratches in the trunks of trees, I saw squirrel teeth marks in ponderosa branch tips, and I recognized ripe piñon nuts in coyote scat.

A year later, I took a job in Tennessee working as the head propagator for a native plants nursery. I had moved back to Tennessee to live with my parents and to save money for graduate school. I was relieved when I got the job working at the nursery, since I would get to be outside working with plants. There, I was responsible for identifying hundreds of plant species in the field and gathering cuttings and seeds from the plants to propagate and eventually sell them. I nurtured the tiny sprouts and

tender cuttings. I found myself overjoyed, and a bit surprised, when they began to grow roots.

I would spend hours at the potting shed, which overlooked a fertile Tennessee valley, gently loosening the roots of my young plants and placing them in larger pots filled with rich potting soil and compost. My hands began to smell like fresh earth, a smell which could not be washed away even with soap. My feet were constantly wet in my sandals from struggling with sprinklers all day, trying to keep my potted plants from drying out in the muggy summer heat. I began to notice when the plants were getting thirsty before they began wilting, and I watched my sunflowers and Ironweed grow from one to six feet tall in a matter of weeks.

I cared for the plants as if they were my children, trying not to miss a day of work for fear that someone would neglect to water them. I especially babied the ones that had medicinal properties, such as black cohosh, ginseng, goldenseal, St. John's Wort, and four different species of *Echinacea.*

The work was not easy, though, and early into the summer, I realized that some plants caused me more frustration than joy. Because we used no herbicides at the nursery, and because we housed the plants in cold frames under trees and near lush fields, we also had an overabundance of weeds.

Many of the weeds that began strangling out our potted plants were actually useful and desirable plants in one sense. Chickweed, which grew in thick mats on top of the soil in the pots, is an edible and nutritious food that can be eaten in salads or sautéed in stir-fried vegetable dishes. Amaranth looked ragged and would stab you with its thorns through the thickest gloves, but it has edible leaves and seeds, and was a staple food for the Aztecs. Pokeweed, which can grow to be twelve feet tall in Tennessee, has edible shoots and red berries that can be used as a dye.

Despite the usefulness of such plants, they were definitely weeds to me. They grew in the pots with the plants, choking out slower-growing plants I had raised from seeds or cuttings. They grew in the gardens, the pokeweed forming thick magenta stalks which towered over my head, and they even showed up in the greenhouse growing in the sand on the mist tables. I usually spent several hours a day weeding, and I used to have nightmares about weeds growing in through my windows and doors. I even pulled weeds in my sleep, as I dreamed that they were growing up from the crack between the bed and the wall.

Nightmares and all, plants were my life in Tennessee.

When the blackberries ripened and hung dark and fat from thick shrubs, I would put on long pants and a long-sleeved shirt and venture out to pick them. I had to wear long clothes, despite the ninety-degree heat, to try to keep chiggers and seed ticks off of me. I had to do the same when venturing up on grassy hillsides in the woods, looking for the almost white, shade-loving Echinacea plants that we found on the land or the eerie white berries of the doll's eye plant.

Once, I was bushwhacking through a field of six-foot tall wildflowers and weeds, trying to get to the feathery clouds of clematis fruits I saw ahead. Suddenly, I felt a sharp needle stick in my leg. The one needle turned into one hundred within seconds, and I ran out of the field and straight into the creek. I jumped in the water on all fours, realizing that I had run into a stinging nettle plant. As I laughed at myself and my predicament, welts popping up on my shins, I saw a mass of watercress near the shore. To soothe myself, I took a handful and ate it, still kneeling in the cool, clear water. Later that day, I found my first spider lily, its ghost-white bloom reminding me of a crudely fashioned spider web. It stood two feet tall, alone in a field of asters, sunflowers, and native grasses.

Watching the meadows and creeksides erupt with so many plants and wildflowers was exhilarating. Working with my hands in the soil every day, I couldn't help but feel connected to the earth. Having recently left New Mexico, where I felt more at home than anywhere else, I had needed desperately to reconnect with nature in Tennessee. The plants that I grew and hunted not only provided a purpose for me, but they gave me entertainment, company, and deeper sense of nature's seasonal and cyclical changes. They constantly amazed me with their colors, shapes, and stubborn persistence. My relationship with them was not only healing for me, it felt like I had gained something I had been missing.

Today as I worked in the herbarium, I catalogued plant number 128,910, a plant in the same family as valerian. As I opened the eight-foot tall metal cabinet to put it away, the smell of sweaty feet overpowered me. I smiled to myself and thought about New Mexico. I wondered what Alicia might be doing now, since she moved off-the-grid to the Gila Wilderness Area. I get letters from her sometimes, and she tells me about walking in the dry mountains of New Mexico, talking to the plants, trying to gain more of their knowledge.

There must be as many ways to form a relationship to nature as there are people, yet so many choose to do so through plants – gardening, farming, caring for house plants, picking wildflowers. Plants have something extraordinary, cyclical, ancient to teach us about ourselves as a part of our natural world, and I am glad that now I can slow down enough to listen to them.

In the herbarium this morning, I looked up from a newly glued flowering clematis vine and noticed that it was beginning to snow. A cloud hung over the rounded blue peaks in the distance, and I studied the aspen by the window, the tree

top at my eye level. Its brown-spotted, mustard yellow leaves fluttered in the fresh-snow wind. I heard it whispering to me through the picture window. It welcomed me into its branches, now naked at the tips, and I felt as if I had just climbed the tree, the taste of dandelion still on my tongue.

Art and Nature Intertwined: Art as Natural, Nature as an Art

A few years ago, while surrounded by thick, wet mountain laurels and rhododendrons in the Blue Ridge Mountains during an Outward Bound course, I discovered that having what I feel is a personal, intimate relationship with the natural world is necessary to my emotional and psychological health. I have come to believe that this is the case for everyone, whether or not they know it in such terms. I think that this relationship with nature is something that people have when they are children, only to grow up and take indoor jobs, sit inside their houses, and watch TV specials about science and nature rather than experiencing it for themselves. Is it possible that people, before they learn "science" and how to look at their worlds more analytically, have closer relationships with nature, while they are able to look at the natural world with a more "artistic" eye? And can the process of creating art, especially art inspired by nature, actually bring us closer to nature through some sort of transcendent quality?

My love for nature is strengthened by writing, drawing, and painting. I believe that creating and enjoying art is a natural behavior for humans, and that there are reasons for its prevalence in our species that we may not even recognize.

Gene Stratton Porter's classic *Moths of the Limberlost* describes her experiences in the process of creating art about nature. She writes about photographing Cercropia moths emerging from their chrysalises, uncrumpling their wings and drying them out, then mating that night and laying eggs the following morning. Porter created a work of art in which she describes creating another work of art of a natural process. After I first read the passage, I wanted to do the same. I

decided to create a painting of nature from life and then write about the process. In this way, I wanted to describe what it is about painting that draws me to it and that strengthens my relationship to the natural world. I also wondered if the creative process of painting from nature might allow me to transcend the mundane, giving me more than I would normally receive from an experience in which I merely observe some nature scene.

Having also recently read a selection from John Fowles' *The Tree,* I began to consider that there may be "an art" to experiencing nature and developing a relationship to the natural world. Fowles suggests that we approach the natural world with an artistic sensibility rather than a purely analytical one. There is more value and depth to such experience; stripping nature down to a science removes the mystery and the metaphors that are so valuable to our enjoying and identifying with our surroundings. Reading this led me to explore some of the meanings of art and nature for humans. Is it possible that there is "an art" to forming a relationship with nature? Does actually creating art about the natural world help in that connection? And is the act of creating art actually a "natural" human behavior that serves to help link us to our environment?

I set up my easel in the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge near Stevensville, Montana. It was mid-April. I was between a dirt road and a fenced-off pond, facing the pond and the Bitterroot Mountains in the distance. It was a cool and cloudy morning, about 40 degrees at 9:00 am. The sun had risen and was behind me to the east, completely covered in high clouds. The mountains ahead were still snow-covered in places, and clouds hung low at the sharp peaks. St. Mary's Peak, the tallest, looked entirely covered in snow.

The pond was absolutely alive with birds. American coots, cinnamon teals, American grebes, mallards, Canada geese, and wood ducks were swimming all around the lake, honking and tweeping, dabbling and diving in the dark water. Two nesting pairs of osprey were nearby, cheeping from their huge nests made of sticks and branches that lay atop man-made nesting platforms as high as telephone poles. One member of a mating pair occasionally left the nest to fish, flapping and soaring over the pond and sometimes crashing down into the surface of the water. The trilling and squawking of red-winged blackbirds and yellow-headed blackbirds resting on lakeside reeds added to the orchestra of bird sounds around me.

I set up my canvas and began to sketch the shapes of the mountains with vine charcoal, paying attention to the little crooks and bumps and the relation of each peak to the others. I drew the outline of the large white farm house in the trees along the horizon and the shape of the shoreline below it. I squinted my eyes, trying to see the areas that were darkest, the evergreen trees on the horizon, and the lightest, the snow on top of St. Mary's Peak and the cloud that hung near it. I painted the lightest parts first, mixing titanium white and a tiny bit of ultramarine blue. The snow on the peaks was not pure white. It seemed to be reflecting some of the blue-gray sky and clouds above it. I painted the whitest areas, and then put down the brush. I mixed some sap green with ultramarine blue and blocked in the evergreen trees on the horizon with another brush. This is Montana, I thought to myself, snowcapped peaks and tall pine trees, cool cloudy mornings bursting with wildlife.

I then painted the sky, mostly a light military-gray with some white clouds and a few darker snow clouds hanging low over the mountains. Next I set about painting the peaks themselves. I determined that they were a dark, misty purple with areas of forest green on the closest hillsides. I could see spots of green trees way up on the

highest peaks, standing out in the areas with the most snow. I had always wondered about that "purple mountain" phrase. I had never known mountains to look purple until I started to look closely at the Bitterroots on this cloudy spring morning. I tried to capture the sharpness of the peaks and the ridges, and I noticed that there was a lot more snow on the north-facing slopes. The clouds shifted as I painted the mountains. There were a lot more gray ones now, some hanging over the top of St. Mary's Peak.

I was glad I had already established the sharpness of that peak and the pinhead-sized trees that stood on each side of it. I remembered reading a book about painting "en plein air," or outdoors, which described how you need to paint what you see first, get it down, and then leave it alone. It said that you shouldn't try to continue to change the painting as the landscape changes; the challenge in painting from life is in remembering your first impressions of the colors and shapes and sticking with them. Although I am not one to follow rules, especially rules about creative processes, the rule made sense to me at the time. Otherwise, my canvas would turn to a blob of colors, trying to capture the constant change in clouds and shadows.

As I continued to paint the mountains, I was surprised to see that the dark greens and purples on my canvas mixed well, while maintaining the integrity of each color. I had thought that I would just get "mud," as painters call colors when they are over-mixed. But when I mixed the two, they both appeared on the canvas, in lovely streaks and swirls. I was glad, because the mountains were both green and purple, with some areas of purple that were more blue also, and I wanted to capture all of those colors without turning them into brown mud on the canvas.

While I painted the blues, purples, and greens, and then added white snow on top of the other peaks with a palette knife, I almost felt as if I were on top of the mountains. I was looking at them so closely, in such detail, trying to see where the

trees were growing, where the snow lay, and where ridges connected to peaks. I imagined what it looked like up there as I painted it, and my concentration was strong enough that no other thoughts were entering my mind.

I began to paint the trees on the horizon and the farm house. The field in between them and the pond was tan and yellow, and I found it difficult to accurately portray what I saw. There were millions of blades of grass and reeds, but I didn't know how to show that on the canvas. I did my best, painting the colors as close as I could get them and then taking my palette knife and scoring the paint in the field and some in the trees, to suggest blades of grass and tree trunks.

Painting the water was the most difficult task. When I began, the water was relatively still, except for the ripples made by the birds swimming and diving in it. It reflected the mountains, and the trees on the horizon were reflected on top of the mountains. As I painted, though, the wind picked up and created tiny waves all over the surface of the water. The waves did not allow the reflections to stay. I could not remember the details of the reflections in the water, and I did not want to paint the reflections inaccurately. So I instead began to paint the waves in the pond. Every so often, the wind would die down again and show some reflections in the water, making the task of painting what I saw even more difficult. There were also American Coots, black duck-shaped silhouettes, floating all over the pond in my view, but I did not paint them. I wanted to wait until I finished the water so that I could paint them in last.

I was painting faster and faster, a little worried that I could not capture everything before I needed to leave. I finally had to go before I was completely happy with the water and horizon, but I thought I could finish it from memory later.

Besides, I thought, it is the process of painting that I love most, not the finished product.

Had I not been painting, I know that I would not have sat in one spot for three hours, watching subtle changes in the landscape as they occurred, and seeing how other things did not change. I was so still and quiet while painting that the scene seemed to be going on despite me, as if I were not there. The birds swooped over my head and swam in the pond close to me, paying me no attention. It also felt as if I were not present to myself, that I was such a part of the landscape that my thoughts, feelings, and worries were no longer present. I was not thinking much at all; I just was.

Painting is to me what meditation is to many people. It is a way to leave myself behind for a while, to live in the present and focus only on the tangible - what is there to be seen, heard, and smelled. It is a way for me to connect to my surroundings, in this case the natural world around me, to see it more closely, and to become a part of it.

My own love for writing and visual art, especially writing and art about or depicting nature, has made me think a lot about art's "usefulness" to people. Because I derive so much pleasure from reading, writing, drawing, and painting, I wonder to what degree such activities are necessary to the health and happiness of myself and others. I believe that art is essential to my happiness, regardless of whether the quality of the art is objectively "good" to those who think themselves appropriate judges. Due to my personal experiences and my recent research, I have come to the conclusion that creating and enjoying art are natural human traits. Put simply, nature writing and art are, in fact, natural.

In her book *What Is Art For?* Ellen Dissanayake makes the argument that art is a natural human tendency and that it is beneficial and necessary to humans. She writes that art (defined as visual art, decoration, music, dance, theater, or storytelling - not practical tool making or shelter-building) as a behavior, as in both creating and viewing, has evolved in the Darwinian sense. And since it has, it must be an important trait.

Dissanayake lists three points that show that art is an evolved, biological behavior. First, the arts are universal. Every society makes use of artistic creation and expression in some form. And, in the Darwinian sense, if a feature or behavior is pervasive in an animal population, it is because it has contributed in some way to the evolutionary fitness of members of the species. Second, the arts are so much a part of life that they are too important to be omitted in many societies. In Darwinian evolution, if a lot of energy is used for a certain activity, as seen in ways that artistic endeavors are carried out by many societies, then it also suggests that such activities have "survival value." Third, the arts are a source of pleasure for people, thus also suggesting that they are biologically advantageous, since nature tends to make many necessary tasks pleasurable to assure that they get carried out. So it seems from her arguments, whether we realize it in such terms or not, the arts are beneficial and necessary to humans, possibly in ways that we do not even realize.

The case for art as a natural human behavior is strengthened by a few other points. One is the observation made by psychologist Howard Gardner that all normal human children, by age seven or eight, have the mental and physical abilities to make and respond to art in the form of pictures, stories, and music. Gardner found, through his studies of human educational development, that the differences between children's art and adults' art is only one of degree and complexity, not kind. Art is not just

something that "talented" people have the ability to create and enjoy, but it is something that all normally-developing people make and respond to from early on in development.

Chimpanzees, with which humans share 99% of their genetic material, also have the ability to make art. Dissanayake describes studies in which chimps were given painting materials and used them freely, without reward. Their paintings were judged by people to have what we consider to be aesthetic traits such as balance, form, and control. One chimp that knew sign language told scientists what her paintings were of, showing that she realized she was representing something tangible, such as a berry or a bird. While these examples could be explained in any number of ways, they do suggest that art as a behavior is a natural human trait and that it possibly existed in even very early human ancestors, as it exists in different species of apes.

Though it seems clear from the above that art is in fact "natural," the reasons for the historical and present creation and response to art are not quite as clear. In other words, why is art important? Why has it been a naturally-selected trait in humans? Dissanayake writes that one frequent explanation is that art "echoes or reflects the natural world of which we are a part." However, her explanation of this idea is that art reflects or invokes human emotion as "the natural world," and she makes little reference to nature outside of human nature. She writes that art's attention to rhythm, form, and emotion may help people be more in tune with other people.

I would argue that, while that may be true, art also echoes and instructs us about the more-than-human natural world. It internalizes for people the rhythms, cycles, and forms that are found all around us in nature, and possibly (historically)

helped teach us to know certain aspects of nature that allowed us to live longer and healthier lives. For example, painting game animals or musically echoing the sounds of a rain storm may have helped ancient peoples internalize information about nature that helped them know what to hunt or when to take cover from storms.

These are just speculations on my part, but they could be an explanation for why some art echoes the natural world around us and why art as a behavior has been passed down through history. And from personal experience, I know that painting or drawing from life allows me to see and relate to nature in a deeper way than merely taking it in with my senses.

Dissanayake touches on this idea when she writes that art may be important to humans because it "exercises and trains our perceptions of reality, it prepares us for the unfamiliar or provides a reservoir from which to draw appropriate responses to experience that has not yet been dealt with." It is possible that creating and understanding art historically instilled in humans the ability to better prepare for and understand our environments, and that it may still do the same for people today.

She also describes an experience similar to what I feel while painting from life. Dissanayake writes that art could be adaptive and beneficial to humans because "it allows direct, 'thoughtless' (or unself-conscious) experience, a kind of apprehension that has atrophied in modern times." She says that art temporarily "short-circuits" our analytic minds in such a way as to allow us to feel the immediacy of color, size, texture, or the power of the subject matter. This brief release from our analytic tendencies as humans, or at least as humans who have been taught to see our surroundings scientifically and analytically, may be beneficial just for that ability to *feel* the impact of our surroundings.

This idea is particularly interesting to me, not just because I understand it to be the case from personal experience, but also because it is echoed by John Fowles. While Dissanayake discusses the possible importance of art to people in that it allows us direct experience without the hindrance of an analytical frame of mind, Fowles, in his book *The Tree*, speculates that a better experience in nature is one which is approached as "an art."

Thus begins the cyclical part of my discussion. Art, as a human behavior, is a natural, evolved trait that may be beneficial in that it teaches us about our world and allows us a deeper connection to our environments. A more valuable experience in nature, or a relationship with the natural world, as Fowles describes it, is better achieved when approached with an artistic sensibility, meaning a less analytical and more emotional and aesthetic approach to experience. Fowles explains that the analytical, scientific way that we in Western society have been trained to view nature is an inadequate approach to forming a quality relationship with the natural world.

Defining a relationship with nature is another large question itself. Fowles describes it as "beyond words." He writes that "to try to capture it verbally immediately places me in the same boat as the namers and would-be owners of nature: that is, it exiles me from what I most need to learn." Personally, I have less of a problem capturing my relationship with nature in words or in visual art. To me, it is mostly a feeling that I am no more and no less than a small but integral part of this awesome, magical system that we call "nature." My relationship with more-than-human nature is the strongest connection I can imagine, a source of my physical, emotional, and intellectual needs and desires. To know this and to feel it deeply is a probably biological or evolutionary attribute that I believe we in the modern, industrialized world have lost touch with and are in desperate need of regaining.

One reason we have lost touch with this relationship with nature in Western society is that we have become dependent on viewing nature with a scientific or analytical approach. Fowles discusses the changes that have occurred in human understanding of nature due to the Victorian-era preoccupation with naming, categorizing, and ranking living things. He believes that the science of taxonomy, which mostly began with Carl Linnaeus, and its effects on our ways of viewing nature, has had two harmful ramifications for Western society. First, this approach has reduced nature to what Fowles describes as a "school lesson," a dry and obligatory study that repels most people in modern Western societies.

Second, according to Fowles, this approach has caused us to forget the "far saner" idea that viewed nature as "an evoker of emotion, as a pleasure, a poem." The act of viewing nature completely scientifically or analytically has, in a sense, taken the art out of the experience. It has taken away the deeper, direct, and immediate feelings Dissanayake and I describe above that can be gained through experiencing nature through art, or, as Fowles argues, through experiencing nature with a "looser use of the word 'art' to describe a way of knowing and experiencing and enjoying nature outside the major modes of science and art proper."

I agree with what Fowles seems to be saying, that there is an art to experiencing nature in its present, always dynamic existence, and that there is much value in such an experience, possibly more value than in simply reducing contact with nature to knowledge of its names, parts, and functions. I also agree with Dissanayake's argument that art is a necessary and beneficial human trait, and that it helps us better understand ourselves and our world. These arguments especially interest me because I came to such conclusions mostly on my own, before reading Dissanayake or Fowles. I came to these conclusions from my experiences forming a

relationship with the natural world and developing my artistic skills in writing and visual art.

I grew up in Tennessee. My early relationship with nature consisted of climbing trees, making mud pies, going barefoot in my clover and dandelion-strewn yard, and getting stung by bees several times a year. I used to roll down our huge grassy hills, overturn rocks in the creek to find crawdads, and jump in the piles of maple leaves my dad would rake together in the fall. I remember when I was around nine years old, I began to seek solitude in the wooded lot beside our house. I would go to a certain spot, sit on the ground or on a fallen tree, and look up at the break in the canopy, where streams of sunlight penetrated the shade and warmed the carpet of fallen and decaying leaves. Having grown up in a Christian household, I believed that God was speaking to me through that scene, not to me directly, but to me and the rest of existence in that moment, saying, "this is good." Even then, nature represented something much greater than myself, something mysterious and spiritual.

I was also an artist and a poet then, writing poems about nature and how it looked, smelled, felt, tasted. I drew pictures to accompany my poems, and I drew and painted pictures without poems as well. As my mom tells me, "You were drawing from the first moment you could hold a crayon, when you were two years old, and you just never stopped." I never stopped writing, either, stories and poems about my disdain for littering, my refusal to eat deer meat from a family friend who hunted and killed the deer, and about how kids should "have equal rights" to adults, which I wrote once when I was sent to my room for fighting with my brothers. My mom tells me I drew and wrote much more than either of my brothers, and that it was obvious

that I had an interest in art from the very beginning. For me, art has always come naturally.

I wrote stories and poems throughout grade school, also keeping a regular journal beginning around the age of ten. I wrote as a way to express myself and to explore the world around me, often writing fiction about people who led very different lives from my own. I was also in the school band and was good at playing the saxophone, but I dropped it in Jr. High to take art class. I continued taking art for four years in high school, serving as the first Art Club President to hold the office two years in a row. I held art shows at school and in the community, winning over one hundred awards, including one Best of Show award for a huge pencil drawing of a friend's face. I was also one of the best writers in my school, especially in critical essays about literature, and I gained a reputation as an "art and literature person," as opposed to the science and nature person I would become in college.

Although I loved art and writing still as an older child and a teen, both began to be reduced into more scientific, objective, competitive skills on which I was graded and judged. Fowles writes about this problem in teaching and learning about nature, how it "curtails certain possibilities of seeing, apprehending, and experiencing." I felt the reduction of my art in those terms, but I was lucky to have good Art and English teachers that were encouraging and flexible in their grading. On the other hand, my experience with learning about natural science subjects in high school was not only reduced to a "school lesson," as Fowles writes, it was a carnival of bizarre characters.

While I enjoyed Trigonometry and Calculus in high school (I had fun math teachers), I hated Biology and Chemistry. I had a lot of natural interest and curiosity about how things worked in the natural world, but my teachers made the subjects miserable. Biology was taught by Earl Schmittou, a mentally ill man who went into

tirades about how he would "rather push a Ford than drive a Chevy," or "all I had to eat as a kid was peanut butter and jelly and a glass of milk, and I liked it!" He refused to personally teach us very much at all, opting instead to put up transparencies of notes to copy in class about xylem and phloem or the regeneration of Planaria. Once, I remember Mr. Schmittou getting livid over the fact that my friend Jason was turned sideways in his desk. We were to face the front at all times, and since Jason was facing sideways, Mr. Schmittou went off on how he "is a virgin, always been a virgin, and will always be a virgin. I am Jesus Christ, you see, and I will be your king until 1999!" I always wondered if 1999 would truly be the year in which he would die. It turns out it was 1998.

High school Chemistry was almost as much of a joke as Biology class. It was taught by Coach Caudill, the football coach. Football was king at my high school, not Mr. Schmittou, and Coach Caudill knew it. He spent much of our class time talking about football with the players in my class, and only after my harassing him to teach the subject did he begin to explain some basic concepts of chemistry. Mostly, though, I remember spending our time in class socializing while Coach Caudill drew diagrams of football plays on the chalkboard. It is a wonder that I retained any interest at all in the natural sciences after my experiences, but my love for nature and my desire to preserve what felt like a world in danger and without a voice caused me to go to college to study Environmental Studies.

I completely switched gears in college, from artist and writer to ecologist. I did take one drawing course in college my first year, though, and I loved it. My teacher, Gabrielle, was a graying German woman who taught us to draw from life and to "free up" our craft by forgetting previously-learned notions about art. During the first semester, I also took General Ecology from Virginia, a younger woman who had

just received her Ph.D. and was looking for a permanent professorship. She was a good teacher, and I fell in love with the subject.

Virginia taught me how to identify, analyze, categorize, theorize, research, and prove or disprove. I decided to major in Environmental Studies with a concentration in Biology. I studied mostly ecology, though, because I liked seeing "the big picture." I learned to see connections and interdependencies among living and nonliving things. Most of my labs were conducted outside, watching American bitterns move with the reeds in South Dakota, canoeing the Boundary Waters Wilderness in Minnesota, or watching bald eagles and osprey soar over the lake at the college field study area.

This kind of ecological thinking and work was challenging and exciting to me, and I liked being able to name things that I saw in the wild. My science instruction in college was helpful to me also because *knowing* things, how they work, why they behave certain ways, etc., helped dispel some fears and myths that prevented me from really immersing myself in the natural world. Somewhat contrary to Fowles' argument, my new ability to name animals and plants and to determine their intricate connections and functions in an ecosystem actually helped strengthen my connection to nature. However, I believe that the foundation for my relationship with nature had already been created in my first eighteen years of life. And I am not sure if my relationship to nature would have been strengthened by my science training had I concentrated on chemistry, microbiology, or genetics instead.

My relationship to the natural world became stronger and clearer during an Outward Bound instructor development course that I took after college. It lasted two months, most of which was spent living outdoors, backpacking, whitewater canoeing, and rock climbing in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. It was during my "solo experience," when I spent two days alone with only a tarp, a sleeping bag,

clothes, water, a bagel and a handful of trail mix, that I had the "a-ha" experience that I often refer to today.

I was sitting alone on a boulder at Buck Creek, drinking water from the rushing stream, and letting my sore muscles rest. I was facing upstream, writing in my journal, when it came to me. "I need this," I wrote, "and I have to remember it. I know I will lose touch with this feeling once I am back in the city, but I have to remember how much I need nature. I need it more than anything else, to feel connected like this. I am a part of nature, and it is a part of me, Buck Creek is running through my body and my emotions, just as I am sitting in its midst." I realized that feeling my connections to the natural world is essential to my psychological health, and I surmised that this may be the case for other people as well.

This was the "green woman" inside me, the "wild" side of me, as Fowles refers to it, that had been born into me as a natural animal and nurtured as a child exploring nature in rural Tennessee. It has not been hindered by either my art or my science training; it has instead been enhanced by both. In *The Tree*, Fowles makes a case for the difference between nature and art by saying:

> But nature is unlike art in terms of its product - what we in general know it by. The difference is that it is not only created, an external subject with a history, and so belonging to a past; but also creating in the present, as we experience it. As we watch, it is so to speak rewriting, reformulating, repainting, rephotographing itself. It refuses to stay fixed and fossilized in the past, as both the scientist and the artist feel it somehow ought to; and both will generally try to impose this fossilization on it.

I disagree with his statement that scientists and artists feel that nature ought to stay fixed and fossilized; on the contrary, I write and paint so that I may feel a part of the dynamic process of nature. By describing its changes in writing and capturing its likeness on the canvas, it is even more obvious to me that nature is rewriting and

repainting itself constantly. No description of nature on paper or painting of it from life is just like another, and that also shows that nature is not one to stay the same.

I do find it interesting, though, that Fowles chose the word "fossilized" to describe what artists and scientists try to impose on nature. Fowles is right, nature does not stay fixed, though parts of it can remain fossilized for a time. But I think it is accurate to use the term "fossil," since fossils are preserved relics of nature past; and art, particularly art about nature, is also a natural thing that serves as a fossil does -- to show us something about life in the past, in this ever-changing natural world.

Art shows us that we are natural beings, animals shaped by our environments. While science can show us our connections to nature as well, art shows us our need to understand and internalize the natural world in a way that simply naming or analyzing it can not achieve. And it shows us that we are fragile, small beings. Maybe, if sometimes we are trying to stop time in a photo or on a canvas, we do so because we know that we are only a whisper in the pond, drowned out by the squawks and splashes and trills of life around us that were here before and will be here long after we are gone.

I have on several occasions had the desire to rework certain parts of the painting I did in the Bitterroots. However, so far I have resisted that temptation, for the same reason that Fowles is wrong about my intentions toward art. It is not in the finished product that I find the deepest satisfaction. It is in the process, and each painting and essay that I create are moving and changing in a way, in the sense that they are reflections of my ever-changing love for the natural world. They are not perfect, museum quality pieces that will forever remain a fossil of human culture; they

are instead one person's attempt to learn, move, and change with the world around her.

Solo on Buck Creek

I start at my feet, documenting in my journal numb toes, blisters, then a huge bruise on my shin, sixteen bruises on my right knee, ten on my left, scratches covering my arms, a rash on my face. It is the first time I have ever been backpacking, and in the last eleven days I have found myself clambering up steep slopes for hours, collapsing onto my heavy pack once I reached the ridge or the summit, and sliding down north-facing slopes until dark. I spent most of the descent one day on my behind, scooting under tangled rhododendrons and mountain laurels, cursing the sixty pounds I carried on my back.

After examining the bruises on my legs, I notice a tiny waterfall flowing nearby. I watch the water gurgle over mossy pebbles and then flow swiftly to a crack between larger rocks, swishing and spraying its way through. I imagine the same water running through my body, cooling and healing my swollen joints and exhausted muscles. I am perched on a big, flat rock in Buck Creek, in the middle of the Pisgah National Forest, writing in my journal. Today is day twelve of a two-month Outward Bound course in North Carolina. This is the first day in almost two weeks that I am able to spend alone, tucked away in a wilderness that up to this point I have only imagined.

The revolt my body is waging in the form of joint-swelling, bruises, and nerve damage in my toes is a testament to the fact that I am not, nor have I ever been, an athlete. I just graduated from college, a small liberal arts school in St. Paul, Minnesota, where I majored in Environmental Studies with a concentration in Biology. Despite my ongoing passion for environmental protection, I can't label myself as "outdoorsy." My four years in the Twin Cities kept me busy studying in the library and in science labs, stomping my Sorrels through crunchy snow in subzero

temperatures to go grocery shopping, and taking the bus to Minneapolis on weekends to see an independent film or to go thrift store shopping. My contact with non-urban nature was reduced to occasional field trips or outdoor labs and reading books on ecology and environmental ethics, policy, and economics.

Overall, the Twin Cities proved to be a stifling place for me to live. Although I loved the easy access to cultural events and the diversity of people, restaurants, and entertainment, I grew depressed living in the city. I gained thirty pounds my first two years of college, even though I walked everywhere I went. In my spare time during the long, frigid winters, I watched movies in my apartment and ate Ben and Jerry's ice cream, huddled under blankets to stay warm. I cried a lot, unconscious to the causes of my suffering, and unsure how to cure my sadness.

I sometimes longed to be in the forest. In desperation to feel better, one day I took the city bus all the way to the end of the line, near a park by the Mississippi River south of St. Paul. It was early fall my Junior year, and I kicked up dried leaves with my black Converse sneakers and sat for hours on a fallen oak tree in the woods alongside the river. I felt a little better, reflecting back on my place in the woods near my parents' house in Tennessee, where I comforted myself as a child. I breathed the crisp leaves and the muddy river, and stayed as long as I could before having to return to my apartment in the city.

My senior year I grew interested in environmental and outdoor education, and I spent a semester working as an education intern at a zoo. The joy and wonder of the children I taught at the zoo was contagious. I wondered what it would be like to teach about nature surrounded by wilderness rather than in a city, and I researched outdoor education trainings on the internet. I came upon a 55-day course with Outward Bound called "Introduction to Outdoor Education," and I knew I had to do it. I signed

up for the course for the fall after college graduation. I knew then that the physical strain of backpacking and living outside for two months would be difficult, but I had no idea what else was waiting for me in those lush mountains and valleys a thousand miles away.

I had to begin training immediately. The website said that we should be able to run for at least four miles without stopping. I started running that spring and worked myself into being able to run the four miles to the Mississippi River and back. I kept up that regimen three or four times a week through the summer after college graduation, when I worked again at the zoo, teaching summer classes and supervising teenagers in planting a butterfly garden.

When I moved back to my parents' house in Tennessee that fall, I started walking the quiet, hilly roads with my hiking boots on and a backpack full of books. I was trying to get used to carrying weight on my back and to break in my new hiking boots. I could only hike the roads at night, though, because the heat and humidity made it miserable during the day. Besides, I felt a little silly hiking the paved roads with a large pack of books in a middle class neighborhood while polite housewives wearing white sneakers and bermuda shorts took leisurely walks in the evenings.

In mid-September dad drove me to the airport in Asheville, North Carolina, where I met the other eleven students taking the course. It was easy to tell which people were there to meet for Outward Bound. There was a gathering of young twenty-somethings wearing new hiking boots, shorts, and brightly-colored bandannas, all sitting on their huge backpacks. When the instructors arrived, they herded us all into one van, throwing our packs on the top and securing them with climbing rope.

My stomach was filled with butterflies the entire van ride out to the Table Rock base camp.

Base camp is tucked away on the side of Table Rock Mountain, with only dirt roads leading up the windy mountainside. When the van finally stopped on one of those roads, we piled out and were greeted warmly with a silly icebreaker exercise. After we were all laughing and talking, they told us that if we needed to go to the bathroom we should do so before we got back in the van and rode out to the buildings. I looked around for a cabin or an outhouse: nothing.

"Where are we supposed to go?" I asked.

"You've got thousands of acres of woods to do what you need to do!" answered Moose, the pony-tailed instructor with an Australian accent.

"Here we go," I mumbled, and I wondered what we were supposed to do without any toilet paper. From that point my survival instincts began to kick in slowly, and I knew that I would need to tap into them constantly over the next two months. I peed for the first time in the woods, without toilet paper, and I felt a light pine breeze on my bare thighs.

My eleven group members and I spent the first night together at base camp in a tiny cabin with crude bunk beds made out of wood planks and old foam pads. I didn't sleep at all; the warm, syrupy air was filled with snores all night long. And I was very nervous. I worried that I wouldn't be able to keep up with everyone, that I would hate it, that I would miss my bed and showers and junk food, and that I would twist an ankle, drown while rafting, or slip while rock climbing. I thought over and over, "Why am I here?"

The next day we were issued our gear, and the instructors, Scott and Laura, left us alone to pack our backpacks. I had no idea how to do it. Everyone else

seemed to know what they were doing, so I followed their lead. I brought too much stuff, and I had to pare down a lot. I wondered how stinky it would be to have to wear the same clothes day after day, without washing them, and without washing ourselves. Scott and Laura told us that we would be out backpacking for twelve days, but that we would have one supply run out to us to replenish our food and medical supplies as needed. The first twelve days make up our student experience. We first learn what it is like to be students of Outward Bound, and then we begin training to be instructors of wilderness trips ourselves.

We left that afternoon, hitting a trail off one of the dirt roads leading to the base camp, following our instructors and chatting excitedly. After the first day of backpacking, I realized that it would be a constant struggle for me just to make it hour to hour, day to day. I was slow in going down steep trails, and I tried to make up for it by walking faster on flat ground, so I had no time to rest. After several hours of steep downhill hiking with sixty or more pounds on my back, my knees started to feel weak. That night after dinner, I gagged as we were taught to clean our bowls by swirling a bit of water in them and drinking it down, then wiping out whatever food was left with dried leaves and dirt. In the middle of the night, trying to sleep under the tarp with the two snoring guys and three others, I was sure that there was a skunk sniffing my head. I lay as still as I could until I thought it was gone, and then I got up, laced my boots, and walked out into the trees to be alone. It was my first time away from the group, and I wished I could sleep out there alone in the chirp of the crickets and the brown pine needles.

This was no magical journey. The second day was painful: the first six hours of the day were spent climbing up a ridiculously steep slope, grasping on to trees or rocks just to keep from falling back with the weight on our backs.

I complained out loud, "Is this what you call backpacking? Because I think it's more like rock climbing."

All I got in response from Scott and Laura were muffled chuckles and, "you can do it, Allison."

My right ankle began to weaken first. It was wobbling side to side as I climbed, and I became unable to hold it steady. When we finally reached the top of the ridge, I fell backward onto my pack and just lay there. It was almost two in the afternoon, and all I'd had to eat all day was a bowl of cereal with powdered milk and water. I had simply run out of steam, but all I knew at that time was that I could not go on. Another student, nineteen-year-old Dede, who quickly became one of my favorite people in the group, unbuckled my backpack and helped me up. I stood, feeling lightheaded and wet with sweat, and put the pack on again. I made it a few yards farther where the group was convening to talk about what to do next.

David, also nineteen and overly-enthusiastic, was saying, "Come on guys! We can go for another couple of hours before we have to stop for lunch. Let's get goin'!" Anger and annoyance welled up in me.

"No, I think we should stop here to eat. We need a break," Dede asserted. Scott agreed, and we circled up on our packs for lunch. After gulping down dry tuna from a can with pita bread, an apple, and some trail mix, I felt like a new person. Never having suffered from a lack of food before, I wasn't able to identify the extent to which my energy levels are food-related. I just thought I was weaker or less athletic than the others. After eating, though, my mood changed from exhausted and angry to contented and ready to move on toward our campsite for the night. Scott used me as an example to show the others what happens when we push ourselves beyond what is physically healthy. He told us to make sure to eat enough and take

care of ourselves *before* we get hurt or sick. We continued on for another seven hours, finally making it to our campsite in the dark and eating a dinner of spaghetti just before lying like rocks in our sleeping bags for the rest of the night.

Before we left base camp, I had offered to carry several field guides of birds, trees, and flowers in the area. I wanted to take the time to stop and try to identify the wildlife we would see, to try to familiarize myself with my surroundings. I wanted to teach the other students about ecology, to show them firsthand how intricately connected life is. But I soon learned that no one, including the instructors, talked about the life that was going on around us. We were all consumed with the daily tasks of survival: eating enough to keep our bodies moving for twelve hours a day, finding water, getting to a stopping place early enough to set up camp before it was completely dark, and sleeping hard and dreamless on the ground.

As the instructors gave us more and more freedom to navigate the way ourselves, we also became engrossed in the task of finding our way through the mountains. We used compasses and topographical maps, scanning the shapes and inclines of the land, looking for trails and other signs of humans, and ignoring the lichen and the white pines. The field guides became just more weight that I had to carry.

In the next few days, I became so accustomed to my forest surroundings that the thought of other humans out there became frightening. The abortion-clinic bomber, Eric Rudolph, is supposedly hiding out in the Blue Ridge Mountains. One night when everyone was sleeping, I awoke to crashing sounds in the forest nearby. Some were louder than others, and all of them seemed to be coming from the woods to my left. I looked over at Cody, the Oklahoma fraternity boy that I strangely

befriended, and saw that he was still asleep. I crept out of my sleeping bag and wandered away from camp a bit to listen to the noises.

It sounded as if there were another person or something heavier like a bear walking around the hillside by our campsite. The thought of a black bear excited me, but wondering if there could be a person out there made my heart race. Rationally, I was confident that no person would be wandering around that particular remote area at that time of night, so I continued on and let the mystery of the forest surround me. I stood for a long time, just listening, unable to make out much more than moonless, gray silhouettes of trees in the distance. I tried to rely solely on my sense of hearing, and I noticed that the crashes sounded like they were getting farther away. When I went back to the tarp and got into my sleeping bag again, Cody was awake. His eyes got big when he saw me.

"God, Allison, tell me if you're gonna walk away like that. I thought Eric Rudolph had captured you or something," he whispered.

"Sorry," I said back, and rolled over on my side to sleep.

Regardless of the occasional fear of coming up on a stranger there in the woods, I was comfortable away from the group. In the first few days my only major fear was getting separated from the group entirely and having to make my way around without proper food or shelter, since each of us carried different parts of the group's food supply and tarps. And I continued to be anxious about being able to keep up with the pace of the group. It wasn't easy, but I forged ahead every day, pushing myself harder and harder, doing my damnedest to keep up.

During the first eleven days we backpacked almost every day, rock-climbed for two days, spent a day on a ropes course set up in the forest, and we spent three days whitewater rafting. I was initially very afraid of rock climbing, that I would be

even weaker at that, but I wasn't. I did just fine, while Kim clung to the rock face, crying, frozen by her fear of heights. I managed a long rappel as well, off the face of a cliff and into the canopy of pines below. My view while hanging from the rope was spectacular: rounded mountains, dark green with speckles of red and orange. Early autumn in the Blue Ridge.

This morning we hiked into a shady, lush ravine and stopped on a spot off the trail and overlooking Buck Creek. Scott and Laura explained that this would begin the last part of our student experience, the "solo experience." They told us that we will spend one full day and two nights out alone, separated from each other far enough that we can't see or hear anyone else, but close enough that we can find each other if someone needs help. David, Meredith, and Cody seemed very nervous. I couldn't wait to be alone.

When I got to my campsite along the creek, I immediately took off my pack and scanned for a flat place to set up my tarp. I used trees and rocks to secure the ties and made a one-person shelter, open on all sides to the dirt and plants around me. I took out my sleeping bag, spread it out, and lay down. I inhaled deeply, imagining the power of the clean air, oxygen reaching all areas of my body through the blood, healing and relaxing my overworked muscles and joints. My entire body seemed to melt into the ground as I drifted off to sleep.

I awoke this evening to a view of dark mud and grasses beside my sleeping bag and a fat, black millipede making its way through the grass. Its shiny, armored segments worked together in perfect unison, all of its legs cooperating in waves of movement. For a moment I felt totally at home, a normal presence in this creature's micro-world. Then I got up, put on my sandals, and waded into the creek. I let the

icy water run over my feet and ankles. I found a large, flat rock in the middle of the creek and set up my Crazy Creek chair on it. I settled in to this spot facing upstream, up toward the origins of the water, in a clearing, where the canopy of trees tower over me in a wildly green, sparkling river of its own.

I am drinking water straight from the creek, letting it go down my throat in huge gulps. I am becoming unusually aware of my surroundings. I can feel the water cooling my swollen joints and strained muscles. It is rushing through my system, surrounding my organs like it surrounds the small rocks, rushing over my bones and moistening my skin like the mud on the banks. It is inside me: this place, this air and water, these trees, and these rocks. The water is ancient, has been here since the earth began, and it is becoming part of my body and my mind.

Suddenly, it seems like the movement of the water inside me is giving me a message, handing over a piece of information I was never taught in my eighteen years in school. This is it, the water tells me, this is life. This connection, this understanding, this awe and reverence. It is not a euphoria, rather it is a complete contentment and feeling of oneness with my surroundings, a perfect kinship. It is a security of knowing that it will all be okay, no matter what. I am a part of this world, it is a part of me, and this will never change. It loves me as well as I love it; it accepts me without fake adoration and without placing me in any hierarchy of value. I need it for day to day survival, and I need it to be happy. This connection is what makes me whole.

I begin to write again in my journal, underneath the impressive physical inventory, proof of my journey so far. I write to remember. I know that this feeling, this sudden knowledge, probably won't last upon reintroduction to human society, so

I write with a frantic determination to make this experience imprinted in my soul. The wisdom of the water inside me tells me that I will need this reminder one day, that my very sanity will depend on it. But in what way, I cannot imagine. I stop writing and sit back, watching as yellowing leaves quiver and the water dances around the rocks without hesitation.

Drinking Away Our Rites-of-Passage

I have never had a normal relationship with alcohol. The first time I ever drank, I got very drunk. It was in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, on a trip to celebrate high school graduation. The six of us: myself, Ryan, Jody, Janell, Jason, and Jessica, stuffed ourselves and our luggage into Jody's Jeep Cherokee one early June morning and headed east from our little town in middle Tennessee. Ten hours later, we arrived at Jessica's grandparents' house near the beach just outside the main strip. The following day, we spent hours in the ocean, letting the waves wash over us and take us under the water, dragging us along the ocean floor, and finally coming up and laughing hysterically, spitting water, and cracking jokes to make each other laugh even harder.

Later that night, we wanted to dance. We found a club called "Illusions," all black on the outside except for the name of the club painted in psychedelic-style letters above the entrance door. You had to be eighteen to get into bars and nightclubs, and all of us were except for Jason. He was still seventeen, and he refused to lie to the bouncers. He would not even tell a lie to say he'd lost his ID, so Jody stole it and wouldn't let Jason have it back. Then when we all went inside, Jason told the bouncer his ID had been stolen, and we were all in the doors.

The bouncer had taken a large black marker and put X across our hands to show that we were not old enough to drink, so when we went into the club we headed straight for the bathrooms to wash them off. The bathrooms were labeled "his" and "hers" in pink neon letters, and as smart high school graduates, we thought we knew which ones to choose. We were wrong. When Janell and I walked into the one labeled "hers," we ran right into a six-foot-four drag queen with four-inch heels on.

Janell gasped. His garishly painted face looked down at us, and he said, "Do I frighten you?" His voice was deep and booming, and Janell squealed and hid in a bathroom stall. I smiled and said, "no." He walked out, and I went to the sink and washed the X's off without a problem. Janell did the same.

We all met at the bar and ordered drinks. I ordered a Zima because I didn't know the name of anything else. When we offered to pay, the bartender wouldn't take our money. "It's customer appreciation night," he said, his biceps pushing up the sleeves of his t-shirt, "drinks are on the house until ten." It was eight o'clock. There were only a few other people in the bar at the time, so we found a table and began to drink.

The Zima tasted like a soda to me, and it went down very easily. After a couple of Zimas, I could feel myself relaxing. I felt more comfortable, more extraverted, less anxious about getting caught. I asked the bartender to make me a good drink, something hard that doesn't taste much like alcohol, and he gave me a clear plastic cup with a bright blue liquid in it. He called it a "blue motorcycle. It's got vodka, blue curacao, and soda in it. Try it." It was very sweet, but it had a strong bite to it, much like how I thought paint thinner might taste. I gritted my teeth and took another drink.

After a while, our table was littered with plastic cups with a half inch of blue motorcycle, Zima bottles, and Jason's water cups. He refused to drink because it was a sin, so he haughtily drank down cup after cup of water as we got more and more silly. After ten o'clock, men in the bar bought all the drinks for the guys, Ryan and Jody, but not for the women. So Ryan and Jody asked for more drinks than they wanted and gave them to us, and we all drank for free all night.

I didn't stop drinking the whole time we were there; there was no voice in my head or physical cue that told me I'd had enough. After a few drinks I just wanted more and more; there was no thought process to it. At one point, I remember sitting at the foot of one of the tall cages near the dance floor as Jody handed me money to wave at the long-haired, oily muscleman dancing in it. When he saw me, the stripper came out of the cage and lay across my lap, as I reluctantly put dollar bills in his g-string. I was laughing, worried that his oily body would stain my favorite jeans and interested in the fact that Jody seemed to be living vicariously through me.

The night went on, and the dancing and talking and drinking all went by in a blur. Before we left, we discovered a breathalyzer machine near the door. Barely able to read the directions on how to do it, I took a straw and blew into it as hard as I could. The machine registered my blood alcohol level at 0.15, and I tried again, this time blowing into the plastic straw even harder. The machine registered 0.17, and I laughed so hard that I could barely stand. I was absolutely elated; I had never been so insanely ecstatic and delirious in my life.

Jason, sober and well-hydrated, drove us back to the house that night. We had him take a picture of us all together. In the photo, Janell and I are holding up empty Zima bottles, Ryan's nose is red, and Jody is kneeling in front of us sucking on a cigarette. It was a night that I still consider one of the most exciting and fun times of my teenage years: my first drunk experience in a gay bar in Myrtle Beach with some of my closest childhood friends. The next morning, I had no hangover to speak of, not even a headache.

Our first experiences with alcohol become "hard-wired" into our central nervous systems, according to several different schools of thought. The feeling before

drinking, the action of drinking, and the feelings that result from drinking all remain in our minds and our bodies, becoming permanently imprinted on our being. Deepak Chopra, M.D., in his book *Overcoming Addictions*, explains the process from the viewpoint of Ayurveda, the traditional Indian science of health. If the resulting feeling from an action, like drinking, is painful or undesirable, we will do whatever possible to avoid that pain again. However, if the resulting feeling is pleasurable, we may try just as hard to perform the action again. By drinking repeatedly, we could be trying to simply duplicate the same good feeling, or we could be looking even more pleasure - a better high.

Chopra believes that there is also often a peak experience, a particularly blissful result of our actions, that we later try to re-create over and over again, despite possible unpleasurable results in the meantime. And so the more positive the first experiences with a substance like alcohol, the more likely we are to try to replicate those experiences by drinking again and again.

It is a natural cycle; we humans biologically tend toward what feels good. Alfred Adler's "striving for superiority" theory is that people do what they know to do in order to move toward completeness as human beings. Chopra's discussion of substance use also echoes this idea. If we feel particularly bad in the first place, and alcohol makes us feel better at least at first, we will continue to drink to feel better. Even if we didn't feel bad to begin with, and a first experiment with alcohol is a particularly pleasurable experience, we will probably drink again for the high or the fun of it. This is not to say that if our first experiences with alcohol are negative ones, we will not continue to drink. We might, especially when peer pressure, societal norms and expectations, and advertising influence are pushing us toward drinking.

In the U.S., a common view of drinking alcohol is that it is what adults do. We have a legal drinking age that each of us will reach. Before we turn twenty-one, alcohol is waved under our noses by advertisers, by our older siblings and peers, and by our adult role models. It is for us a rite-of-passage, in a culture in which there are so few. Drinking is portrayed as a grown-up, even sophisticated, pastime or celebration. You drink to have a good time, and if you are having a good time, alcohol is probably involved. Young people know this. Whether or not their parents drink, they know the symbolic meaning of alcohol. They also know that when they turn twenty-one they, too, will earn the legal right to have a good time. They will be adults.

Many teenagers consider themselves appropriately mature and capable, so, why not drink earlier? I volunteer as a drug and alcohol educator for college students at a state university, and one of the most universal beliefs of the students who are required to attend early intervention groups is that drinking is a *right*. It is a right of adulthood, and just as voting or joining the military to serve our country are rights that come at age eighteen, most of the students also believe they should have the right to drink when they turn eighteen. So many of them do.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, in 2002 28% of youth aged 12-17 used alcohol. And from a 1997 study published in the *Journal of Substance Abuse*, those who start drinking younger greatly increase their chances of being diagnosed with alcohol problems later in life. The study found that more than 40% of those who began drinking before age fifteen were diagnosed as alcohol dependent at some point in their lives, compared to 10% of those who began drinking at age twenty or older.

The earlier we begin drinking, and the more positive our first drinking experiences, the more likely we are to end up with a drinking problem or as an alcoholic. Also, according to the disease model of alcoholism, certain people are physically prone to having problems with drinking "normally," or without serious or repeated drawbacks. These people metabolize alcohol differently than others, making it difficult for them to stop drinking once they start, and eventually creating a physical addiction to alcohol in their bodies that fuels the cravings. They may drink to the point of blacking out, while still walking around and talking as if they were just "buzzed," or they may be able to tolerate much larger quantities of alcohol without showing signs of drunkenness.

I am one of those people; I know from experience that my body treats alcohol differently than others.' It did from the very beginning. But I personally do not believe that physical differences are solely to blame for alcoholism.

How will you know if you are prone to becoming an alcoholic and could end up with an addiction? You may not know without experimenting. Genetics may give you a hint. If someone in your biological family has had a drinking problem, you might be more likely to end up with one. However, even if you have no family history of drinking problems, you could still end up an alcoholic. There are so many factors to consider, so many different viewpoints.

When tossing around all of the different theories in alcohol use and addiction, I can't help but consider that humans have been making and consuming alcohol for thousands of years. For many cultures, alcohol has played a part in social and religious life as long as we have proof of such life existing. So what's the problem? Consider these comments from 18-21 year old college students and related research:

"I was found passed out in the dorm bathroom with my head behind the toilet after I got home from a night at the bars. I went to go throw up, and I just passed out in my own puke." *In 1999 over 500,000 college students were unintentionally injured under the influence of alcohol.*

"I am a social drinker. When I'm at a party or a bar, I probably have around twelve or thirteen drinks in a night." *More than 150,000 students developed an alcohol-related health problem in 1999.*

"Yes, I have ended up drunk, having sex with someone I would never have even asked out otherwise." *Over 400,000 students had unprotected sex and more than 100,000 report having been too intoxicated to know if they consented to sex.*

"I usually drive after I've been out drinking. It doesn't really affect me that much." *In 1999, over 2 million of the 8 million college students aged 18-24 drove under the influence of alcohol, and over 3 million rode with a driver who had been drinking.*

"I don't have to worry about getting too drunk to know what's going on because my friends will watch out for me." *In 1999, over 600,000 students were assaulted by another student who had been drinking, and in 1998, over 1400 students died from alcohol-related unintentional injuries.*

So around 28% of youth aged 12-17 drink alcohol. When they go to college, drinking rates skyrocket. Around 80% of college students drink. And according to a study published in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* in 2002, 31% of college students met diagnostic criteria for alcohol abuse and 6% for alcohol dependence. Is alcohol supposed to play such an integral role in young people's lives? Or is there something missing in present-day society that alcohol fulfills for our young people?

In *Nature and Madness*, Paul Shepard describes how our modern Western cultures have removed vital ceremonies of adolescent initiation that were played out in our ancestors' lives for thousands of years. Such rites-of-passage existed to symbolize a person's rebirth from childhood into adulthood, celebrating the changes involved. In his work *Radical Ecopsychology: Psychology in the Service of Life*, psychologist Andy Fisher explains that while our society often treats adolescence as a time of struggle for teens and their parents to adjust to somehow, other societies around the world still view it as a time of great importance for youth and their families. It is a time during which elders of the community offer their knowledge to provide the young people with an experience that powerfully symbolizes the social, physical, emotional, and spiritual significance of maturation into adulthood.

Fisher further writes that adolescents have developed the reputation of "being difficult" because they are struggling with the multiple burdens of physical changes, identity crisis, and spiritual renewal. Our society makes little attempt to celebrate these changes on a large scale, and many youth are sent off into adulthood with little guidance, having to find their own ways to deal with the sudden shock of building their adult identities and new lives. The need for symbolic rituals and ceremony is real, as demonstrated by the popularity of teen-initiated rites-of-passage like joining fraternities and sororities, participation in drinking games, and the newly exposed "power hour" of having to drink 21 shots of liquor in the first hour after a person turns 21 years old.

The emerging field of ecopsychology maintains that industrialization has brought about an enormous change in the ways humans have lived for thousands of years. Our minds and bodies are the same as they were then. We have not evolved to adjust to these changes yet. The abrupt movement into an industrialized world has

taken us away from more practical, earth-based lives that relied heavily on spirituality and rituals to lives that are devoid of much meaningful contact with our natural and human communities. As a result, problems arise such as anxiety, depression, and a general feeling of remaining unfulfilled and unhappy no matter what we do.

The cycle goes on; we suffer from leading lives very different from what we have evolved to do, and we are told that technology offers a cure to that suffering through buying and consuming more and better things. Then addictions to these things arise, creating alcoholics, shopping addicts, or television addicts, and the addictions end up isolating us from each other and our natural environments even further.

The combination of living in this kind of society and the lack of positive community role models and rites-of-passage produces young adults who may be grasping for social meaning and personal identity. And when television, movies, advertising, and the "traditions" of their peers all point to drinking as a way to relax, have fun, find themselves, and make friends, that is what they do. Sometimes they do it to the detriment of their own health, dignity, and safety. And then our society turns around and calls them "crazy" because of their emotional responses and behaviors to living in such a hypocritical world. An ecopsychological viewpoint would maintain that they are not in fact "crazy." They are very normal, and they are in need of proper guidance and balance in their lives that our society is simply not providing.

How, then, do we work to provide our youth with the proper tools to ensure they have the inner strength and wisdom to withstand the pressures of society and their peers? Can we offer alternatives to their traditions of partying and drinking, to their initiation rites that sometimes consist of violence and humiliation rather than celebration and empowerment? And can we possibly do this for them if we ourselves

are suffering from the ills of society, with our own anxieties, sadness, frustrations, and addictions?

I wasn't much affected by the party scene in college, and I rarely drank at all while in school. But when I did drink, I drank to excess. Unable to limit my drinks, I often blacked out and was left unable to remember much of what I did or said the night before. I didn't see this as a problem; rather, I thought it was a normal part of being young, of having fun. No one told me any different.

One way of describing the way I felt when I was drinking is that I was more comfortable in my own skin. I could leave that shy, reserved girl at home and enjoy the company and camaraderie of my peers with less hesitation. I could create a different persona for myself: I could be outgoing, loud even, fiery, and brave. I could explore my own desire for intimacy while also forgetting about my fear of it. I could more easily feel connected to those people around me and to my environment without thinking about the sadness and pain of the world, something I had been particularly sensitive to since I was a young child.

When I graduated from college, I took a two-month Outward Bound course to learn more about outdoor education and to learn something about myself. It was a rite-of-passage for me; somehow I knew I needed one. During the course, I made a realization that shook my world. I realized the extent to which I as a human, and probably all humans, need real and tangible contact with the natural world. Not just for what nature can give to us in the form of resources or recreation, but we need to understand our connections to nature, to feel a part of the cycle of energy and life in the world, for our happiness and our sanity.

What I failed to completely register in my experience at that point was that other powers could overtake that realization I had in the woods. Despite my meaningful connections with nature as a child, my loving and supportive parents, my topnotch college education, and my spiritual awakening in the woods, I still had a major obstacle to overcome.

This is what I did not know as I sat in the deep forests of North Carolina, contemplating my life up to that point. Whether it was the ills of society that weighed on me, the lack of adequate rites-of-passage and community guidance, the bouts of depression I'd experienced during urban living, or simply my physical makeup combined with the positive associations with drinking I'd had early on, I would spend the next seven years of my life privately battling alcohol addiction.

It started out as a fun pastime, a way to connect with friends, to let loose and have a good time. My perceptions and expectations that alcohol would provide me with relief and enjoyment continued on the same way for years. I can see myself in the college students that I work with today; they are living for the moment, unsure of their futures, unable to see many of the negative consequences that come from their lifestyles. And while I am not completely convinced that establishing stronger communities, more connections with nature, and rites-of-passage ceremonies for young people will ensure that they, too, will never fall prey to a substance addiction, I do have hope. Instead of expecting our youth to fulfill their natural needs and desires for connections and meaning through alcohol, promiscuous sex, or violence against others, let us expect more.

We can serve as role models ourselves. We can provide them with safe communities and empowering activities. We can protest the targeting of youth by alcohol and tobacco companies. We can take kids into the woods, into gardens,

parks, or empty lots and let them play, using their bodies and imaginations the way they are made to be used. We can provide young people with meaningful traditions and ceremonies that we create as a way to recognize the meaning of moving from youth into adulthood and as a way of connecting them with their human and natural environments in a symbolic, meaningful way. And we can share our own experiences, without shame, and without reservation, so that others might see themselves in our stories and learn from us.

To Live and Drink in a Thirsty Land

I treat New Mexico as if it were a lost lover. I keep photos of the high desert landscape all over my apartment in Montana. I burn piñon pine and juniper incense to remind me of the smell of Albuquerque in the winter. I fantasize about moving back there, living in the Rio Grande valley in a brown adobe house, the doors and windows open to the blowing dust and sun.

I live in a basement apartment in Missoula, Montana. It is like a cave, dark and sixty degrees year-round. This is what I like to do: lie in bed with all of the lights on, underneath my flannel sheets, electric blanket, down comforter, and pink chenille bedspread. I turn the electric blanket on High. I lie there with my eyes closed and feel myself break into a sweat, with the lights shining bright against my eyelids the way the sun used to in Albuquerque when I'd nap during hot summer afternoons. The layers of blankets smother me in warmth, stronger than the heat of my body. I drift in and out of daydreams about desert dust storms and tumbleweeds rolling across the highway, waves of heat bellowing up from the ground, dirt mixing with sweat and salt on my face. But the question that lingers in my head sometimes startles me out of my dreams: if I go back there, will I be able to hold on to how I have changed?

I lived in Albuquerque for several years after I graduated from college. During my life there, I had four different boyfriends, some wonderful female friends, and a developing relationship with the land. But toward the end of my three years there, the relationship that I ended up relying on the most was the one I had with alcohol. Although I had never been a heavy drinker before, I was drinking heavily by the time I moved there, and I was drinking daily by the time I moved away.

My reasons for leaving New Mexico were many. Most of my close friends there were moving away, I didn't make enough money, I felt increasingly disconnected from my neighbors. I didn't give the landscape enough of a chance to hook and keep me there. My soul grew holes in it, like Swiss cheese, and whenever I needed some guidance or wisdom, I quickly filled in the holes with romantic relationships and with alcohol. I knew deep down what I needed to do to maintain my sanity and begin to establish my true happiness as a grown woman in a place I loved. But my conscious mind wouldn't accept it. The red rock hand of the high desert was left empty, reaching for me.

My drinking habit began to pick up speed from occasional use to heavy use after college, when I finished a two-month Outward Bound course and returned to society. It was exactly what had I warned myself about when I wrote a letter to myself in the tangled forests of the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina. I wrote because I had a moment of clarity when I was alone in the woods. I realized the importance of my relationship to the land, and I knew I needed a kind of intimate relationship with it to be healthy. But, at age twenty-two, my path had already been carved for me for the next few years. I could see it coming.

Part One

I met Dave when I was staying with my parents in that in-between time after college and before finding a job. He was a good distraction from the weight of my new adult responsibilities to get a job and become an adult. He was a twenty-eight-year-old tall, muscular man with black spiky hair and a goatee. He wore bowling shirts and black patent leather shoes with white tops. He chain-

complimented me when I looked nice, told me when I looked like shit, and always bought my drinks.

He was a heavy drinker, and I was able to match him drink for drink, even though he was a much larger person than I. My body just seemed to let the alcohol run right through me without much consequence. At first we had fun together, drinking martinis at Nashville's Havana Lounge one night and sucking on beer bottles at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge the next. I started to realize that alcohol made me feel grown up, sexy, funny, and outgoing. I liked myself more that way, and I felt more comfortable around other people when I drank. My experiences in the forest and the wisdom I gained there began to fade into the smoky red walls and wooden barstools of downtown Nashville.

Dave was not only a successful distraction, he was also my ticket West. We had been dating about a month when he decided to move to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to go to college. He told me that I was welcome to go out there with him, to live for free for a couple of months to see how I liked the place. It was never understood that we would stay together as a couple. We were too different, and there was something about him that made me feel distant and guarded. But I chose to do the risky thing, to have an adventure.

I liked Albuquerque right away. We drove into town at night, when Tijeras Canyon, the path through the Sandia Mountains west into Albuquerque, was opaque blue with shrubby black blobs dotting the hillsides. We slept well in the hotel that would be our home for the next week, and I awoke early in the morning and pulled the curtains open wide. The sun blinded me. I squinted and tried to adjust them, to get a look at the mountains. The day looked amazing! March sixth, and already it was warm and the land was drenched in white sunlight.

I walked outside and got my first look at the Sandia Mountains. They were hazy blue and rounded, not jagged or snowcapped as I had imagined, and they stood as a backdrop to the pink and tan land around. The sun was more intense that I could have imagined.

That morning we drove up to the foothills of the Sandias, the sunroof open on Dave's VW Jetta, and I reveled in the strength of the sunlight on my skin and hair. It would be the first time I would get sunburned in early March. We looked at each other through our sunglasses lenses, smiling at the sudden burst of summer that we had moved into. We walked around in the foothills, among the boulders and prickly pear cactuses, the sagebrush and rough little junipers. I liked the land, the sun, the rock, the dry breezes. I thought immediately that I could love this place. But I had another relationship that was unconsciously starting to be my priority.

Oversized strawberry daiquiris at Applebee's, Cape Cods and gin and tonics at Howie's Sports Bar, Long Island iced teas at Anodyne pool hall downtown. Coming home, passing out, and strategically avoiding hangovers with aspirin, coffee, and water the next day.

After a couple of weeks of that, we decided to take a trip to the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas before we both had to settle down and get jobs. We cruised into Vegas sometime in the early evening and were so excited for our first trip to Vegas that we wanted to get to the casinos right away. We stopped by the Stratosphere to check into our hotel room and to go to the top to see our first Nevada sunset.

I don't remember the sunset. What I do remember is the bar on top of the space needle-like tower and how it slowly spun around in a circle, allowing patient barflies to see the landscape from every angle. My first Nevada sunset was staring into a glass of vodka and cranberry juice.

We headed to the Sahara Casino and played slots for what seemed like hours. Dave was playing a machine two down from me. We each had thirty-two-ounce plastic cups of quarters in one hand, the slot machine lever in the other. Somehow we also managed to hold onto drinks, mine a Cape Cod, his a Gin and Tonic. The casino rang and chimed with coins, slots spinning, ice clinking in glasses. One after the other drink came and went, the waitress after a while not even asking if we wanted more, just bringing it.

At some point, between the vertical spin of the fruits and symbols on the slot and the dark red carpet and walls blending together, I realized that I had not eaten anything in a long time. I had no idea what time it was. There were no clocks or windows anywhere. I thought about all of the buffets waiting for me and knew that I needed to eat.

My energy was waning. And I was drunk. I lay down on the carpet of the Sahara and looked up at the ceiling. The room was spinning, shifting back and forth like the dial on a rotary phone.

Dave was horrified. "Get the hell up, Allison! You are going to get us kicked out of here." I heard him, but I wasn't listening. I either needed food or I needed to pass out. "Damn it, Allison, get up!" Dave was on his feet and used one of them to kick me in the side. "There are security cameras all over the place. If they see you, they will have us kicked out of here in a second!"

The kick in the side did it. I was up on my feet, and I was pissed. I stormed out of the casino, not feeling my feet touch the ground, and out onto the palm-lined street. Under the palm trees and casino lights, I pounded my small fists into Dave's chest, yelling about who knows what, and trying not to hit him too hard for fear that he would hit back.

"Screw you! I'm going back to the room." Dave left me there on the street. Here I was, drunk in Las Vegas, in the desert, and all alone. I went back into the Sahara, where I felt safer, and to the bathroom. I waited there a while, making a plan, trying to remember how to get back to the hotel. Well, I should be able to see it from here, I thought to myself. Yes, I will find it. What room number was ours? 2846. No, 2468. I will try them all. I again charged out of the casino and onto the street. The air was warm on my face as I stomped along the sidewalk toward the towering Stratosphere. I wanted to look tough so that no one would bother me.

Somehow I made it back to the hotel. I found the room on the first try, and collapsed onto the bed. Dave was not there. I drifted into a heavy, sick slumber as my heart raced and my head lay like a rock on the pillow.

I awoke to the sound of Dave walking into the hotel room, but I pretended to be asleep. Through tightly squinted eyes, I watched him go into the bathroom. At that moment, I felt like I was going to be sick. I looked at the clock, 3:48 am. I took a deep breath and slowly lifted my body off the bed.

I knocked on the bathroom door. "Dave, I need in there, I'm gonna be sick."

"Leave me alone - I'm using the bathroom!"

"Dave, I'm serious, I think I'm gonna..." I threw up there, at the foot of the bed, at the door of the bathroom. I must have passed out then, because the next thing I remember, it was 10:50 am, and Dave was packing his bag. He told me that he was angry with me for getting so drunk and puking on the floor, that I was ridiculous, and that we were leaving Vegas now.

We drove through Utah and then down to the Grand Canyon. We spent a total of about two hours at the Grand Canyon, taking pictures and posing for the camera. The scenery was breathtaking and it set my mind to wandering, in and out of the

colorful crevices, my eyes tracing the curves and layers in the rock. The spirit of the place felt so distant to me, though. I was so hungover from the nights before that I was content to just bask in the warmth of the sun and nurse my headache with water and soda. It didn't matter to me whether I was in New Mexico or Arizona, Nevada or Utah. It was all a blur of red rock, desert, and sun. I was a tourist in a strange land.

After a couple more months of this, I finally realized that life with Dave was like a roller coaster ride that never slowed down. One night in Albuquerque, when I was fighting a blackout from countless Long Island iced teas, he took me to a strip bar. I was disgusted, and I ran outside, crying, and stood in the parking lot under the black sky.

In May, I moved in with my new rock-climbing buddy, Ian. He had an extra room, and he offered it to me when he heard about my trouble with Dave. Ian and I had been going out hiking and rock climbing every weekend for a few weeks, and I was drawn to him and his lifestyle. I began learning about the area outside of the bars, climbing in Socorro and the Sandia Mountains, eating huge plates of green chile enchiladas at Garcia's in Old Town after a long day of climbing.

Ian was a native of Albuquerque. His father was a first generation American whose parents moved up from Mexico before they had children. His mother was white and had lived in Albuquerque all of her adult life. He was an only child. Ian was beautiful to me, and I trusted him completely. His black hair, green eyes, and stunning smile used to remind me of Tom Cruise so much that I still think of Ian every time I see the movie star on screen.

It felt good to get acquainted with the landscape, to feel grainy rock under my fingers and smell sage on the wind after a rainstorm. Climbing was a good way to

acquaint myself with my surroundings. I could become an insect or a speck of dust, clinging to the cliffside, thinking of nothing but my immediate survival.

We spent extended weekends in the Jemez mountains, rock climbing during the day and sleeping under the stars on his parents' land.

Ian was a nondrinker and didn't particularly like it when I drank around him. So I tapered off my drinking some and usually only drank on my days off, when Ian was at work. I would get up around 10:00 am, eat breakfast, and lie outside in the sun for a long time, reading. I began to tan a little, which was unusual for my fair Scotch-Irish complexion.

That summer I probably spent more time outside than inside, always barefoot with dry, dusty feet that slid easily across the wood floors and concrete porch of the little square adobe in Old Town Albuquerque.

It wasn't too much of a problem to avoid drinking much around Ian, but the compulsion with alcohol was already there. After leaving Dave, I drank mostly with friends from my job at a bookstore and my new job as an educator for the zoo. I saw no harm in a few cocktails at a bar on the weekends or a couple beers after work with coworkers. It was a way to connect with new friends, to have them become like old friends quickly. Drinking became my best tool for forming relationships. Because it was so easy, and it felt so natural to me, I even tried to use alcohol to help form my relationship with the land.

It was on one of my days off that I remember really beginning to recognize my longing to feel connected to my new place in a more meaningful way. I had made a pitcher of rum daiquiris while Ian was at work one day. I sat outside on the ground near the porch. I was wearing shorts and no shoes, letting the sun bake my tan skin. I drank for a couple of hours, as the sun began to set behind the Albuquerque

volcanoes. As the desert grew darker, my face felt warmer and my head heavier with its own warm light. The glass cold and wet in my hand, I leaned back, taking a huge breath of the moistureless air. I dug my alcohol-numbed toes in the dirt and rocks, rolling around goathead stickers underneath my feet. The sky darkened and the stars began to show, and I began to cry. I wanted to know my place in the history of the land, a desert-scape where ghosts walked the mesas, chanting in some ancient language that I feared I would never understand.

Maybe it was not the ghosts at all, and instead alcohol-induced dreams or fantasies, but I felt like New Mexico spoke to me, and it accepted me no matter how much I drank. Ian did not.

One night Ian eyed me angrily when I ordered a margarita before dinner at a restaurant.

"I knew you would do that."

"Do what?" I had been waiting for him to finally say something about it, but I was my own person, and if I wanted a drink then I was going to have one.

"You know." He shifted in his seat, crossed his arms and said, "I've been wondering, are you seeing someone else?"

"What? Are you kidding me? What does this have to do with ordering a margarita?"

"I don't know," he cut in, "I just hate it when you drink. I don't understand it. You are like a totally different person. I mean you just act weird. I don't like you when you're like that." I didn't know what he was talking about. I couldn't see how I was a different person when I drank, just that I was a happier person. But his concern did make me think more about my habits and what they really mean.

At the bookstore where I worked, while pretending to shelve books, I looked under the self-help section and found a book that looked interesting. It was called *Drinking: A Love Story*, and it was written by Caroline Knapp, a successful young female reporter. I bought it and read through the pages alone, when I could pore over it and sit back contemplating its implications in my own life. I could really identify with her in some ways, and she was a serious alcoholic for over 20 years, finally in recovery. Some small flags were raised in my head, but I wasn't ready to quit yet.

One night when Ian was away at work, I decided to pour myself a glass of port wine with dinner. I had a couple of glasses alone as I watched TV. The wine was extremely sweet and smooth, and like someone with a sweet tooth sampling more and more of a freshly baked cake, I went back to the bottle again and again. There was no inner voice that told me I'd had enough. Instead, there was just the feel of the glass in my hand, the smell of sugary-sweet wine infused with brandy, the warm burn down my throat, the release of tension in my shoulders and neck.

With each glass, I felt more calm and content. One more glass, I told myself, okay, maybe just one more. I poured small glasses at first, and then began filling the wine up to the top of the little wine glass, spilling some out as I lost some control of my muscles, and any usual concern with tidiness just melted away.

After a couple of hours, everything seemed much more interesting. I laughed out loud at stupid sitcoms, and I started to notice the subtlety of the humor on the actor's faces. My world was slowing down, and after some more time, I blacked out.

The next thing I remember is so foggy it seems like a dream. I was sobbing uncontrollably. I looked at the clock and saw that it was midnight. I went to Ian's desk and opened the drawer where I knew his handgun was kept. I clumsily pulled it out of its case and held it in my right hand. The gun, compact and solid, black and

square in my hand, suddenly felt evil. Despair was overtaking me; I had no judgment or rational thoughts, just pure, terrifying emotion. Over what, I don't even remember. Luckily, I put down the gun and reached for the phone.

I called my old college boyfriend, thinking that he might be home and would understand me enough to help me. I remember that I talked with him for a long time, and that he was calm and soothed me with kind and understanding words.

When I woke up the next day, I was in severe pain. My entire body ached. I called my friend Betsy to let her know I wouldn't be coming to work. I walked into the kitchen and saw an empty bottle of port on the table and a purple-stained glass, dribbles of wine staining the table and counter. I couldn't stand for very long, though, as my head was pounding with a ferocity I had never experienced, and I felt like I might double over and pass out at any moment. I poured myself a large glass of water and went back to bed.

The following day, when I could function normally and actually think straight, I decided that I had to stop drinking, at least for a while. I was out of control. I knew Ian would approve also and would support me in this step. So I quit drinking. Strangely, it was easy to do.

Ian and I began to spend all of our extra time climbing and traveling around the Southwest, to the Imperial Sand Dunes near Yuma, to the coast of California, the red arches in Utah, the mountains in central Colorado, and to the cliffs outside of Las Vegas. I loved the hot desert of Arizona, Utah, and Nevada, and I daydreamed of riding horses thorough it, seeing the sun bleached rock and sand before the cities and dams forever changed the landscapes.

But most of all, I loved New Mexico, its miles of mesas, masses of curious hummingbirds zinging by our windows, pink Sandia Mountains and rust-red Jemez Mountains, wild-growing grapevines on brown adobe walls, the unique mix of Native American, Mexican, Spanish, and white American cultures.

In the fall I witnessed my first International Balloon Fiesta, when ten thousand hot air balloons, manned with pilots from all over the world, rose up out of the North Valley of Albuquerque in the early morning hours. I delighted in the silly bright rainbow colors of the balloons, striped and some in shapes of a shoe, an elephant's head, a castle. The balloons were alive with breath, hissing quietly on inhale, loudly on exhale of flames and heat. They seemed to fit right in to the landscape, their colors barely a match for the turquoise October sky that swallowed them. That fall, the smell of roasting green chilies permeated the air for a few weeks, the clean peppery aroma eventually replaced by the smell of burning piñon pine and juniper wood in people's fireplaces and stoves.

Life had more of a bite to it when I experienced it without alcohol. Since I had nothing to numb me out at night, nothing to ease the tension with groups of friends or at parties with new people, there was more to think about. When the fog started to lift, I felt like life was more manageable. I started drawing and painting again, which I realized I had not done at all since I started drinking heavily the fall before. And though sometimes my relationships with friends was a bit strained by my new lifestyle, my relationship to the land, to the desert, was becoming stronger all the time.

I remained sober until I attended a Christmas happy hour party with coworkers from the Education Department at the zoo. We went to an upscale restaurant and bar, and everyone began gleefully looking at the drink specials menu and reading off the

festive cocktail names. A spontaneous thought came to me: I had been able to quit drinking easily, and I had not had or even really wanted a drink in over six months. Maybe I wasn't an alcoholic after all. I was so young! Why should I not be able to have just one drink at the Christmas party? Most of the other women were not regular drinkers. I didn't have to be either. Just this one.

I ordered a Long Island iced tea, one of my old favorites when I was with Dave. Mary, one of the women in my department, was the only woman to order a non-alcoholic drink. Catherine teasingly asked her why, and Mary pulled out an envelope from under the table. She opened it, and with a beaming face, showed us all an ultrasound photo of her baby-to-be. She announced she was three months pregnant. I was happy for her, though I couldn't exactly identify with the extreme joy that the thirty- and forty-something women were exhibiting. Little did I know at the time that I was also pregnant, just three weeks along. I ordered one more cocktail that night, and that was all I wanted.

Before I drove to Tennessee to see my family for Christmas, I went out on the town with friends Erin, Betsy, and Chris. I didn't have more than four or five drinks, though, and felt like I again had control over my drinking, that I would be fine from then on. But I did not tell Ian.

I drove east to Tennessee alone, moving of the land of dry mountains and red mesas, through west Texas, where I first fell in love with the desert. I had visited during spring break in college one year. What I remember most about that trip were rock-hopping roadrunners and their wild eyes, hundreds of jackrabbits and deer along the highway in the evenings, and the smell of burning petroleum being pumped out of the ground from mallet-shaped oil rigs. I also remember feeling strangely serene

there in the arid grasslands, even when my friend blew a tire on his old pickup and we were left to hitchhike, and the closest town was forty miles away.

As I continued east, the flat, dry landscape eventually gave way to more frequent small towns and taller trees. I headed east and north, through the barren farm fields of Arkansas, over the Mississippi into Memphis, and northeast toward Nashville.

When I finally got to the three exits for my hometown, it was again dark, and I turned onto the exit leading me onto country Highway 48 so I could go slowly and see the countryside. I rolled down the windows; it was cool but not cold, and I inhaled the humid night air. Tennessee smelled so different from New Mexico, musky, in a way, like wet wood and dead leaves.

At Christmas dinner, when my dad offered me a glass of wine, I took it. It was all I drank while I was there. But I soon started feeling physically very strange. I had what I thought were premenstrual cramps for days and days without relief, and I felt nauseated every evening.

The entire car ride back to New Mexico, I became extremely nauseated, and I continued to have cramps without any sign of my period. On the ride through Texas in the dark, I finally made the connection.

When I got back to Albuquerque, I went to Planned Parenthood, and, with Ian waiting outside, found out that I was in fact pregnant. I was dumbstruck and angry with myself. I had refrained from drinking for six months, and when I finally decided to have some harmless drinks, I did so when I was pregnant. I also had no health insurance, and I was only twenty-three.

That night I retreated to our little adobe house and curled up on the sofa, peering out the window onto the dusty sidewalk near the front porch, and out into the

weak, gold winter sunset. For the first time in a while, the desert did not comfort me. I felt very alone out there, as I watched the last lizards silver-slipping into cracks in the sidewalk, trying to hold out until warmer months, and I thought about the tiny new life curled up inside me, also anticipating summer.

Ian wasn't much help at all. He yelled at me for sitting around all evening and said that I should stop feeling sorry for myself and figure out what I was going to do. When I begged for his input, what he was feeling, thinking, he told me that he would never marry me and that if I thought he trusted me, I was a fool. As he slammed the bedroom door that night, I realized that I had in fact been a fool to fall in love with this man. I decided then that I would have an abortion and prepare to move out. I remembered that my friend Betsy had an open room in her house in the South Valley.

The next month was a blur. After the abortion I felt relieved yet shattered inside over the end of my relationship and losing my home in Old Town. I never allowed myself time to mourn for the loss of a potential life. Instead, I drank.

Part Two

I shared a large adobe house in the South Valley with my friends Betsy, Stu, and Brian. Betsy always talked about how the South Valley reminded her of Puerto Rico, with its unpaved roads, tacquieras, corner produce markets, and Spanish as the dominant language on the streets. Like a chameleon, I let myself adapt to my surroundings quickly. And I used drinking to ease the transition.

Soon after I moved in, the center of our house turned into a local hangout. It had a big wet bar and a dance floor, and we always kept the bar stocked. Jack Daniel's and Seagram's, Bacardi and Absolut, cranberry juice and cola. Betsy and I

would sometimes go to Kelly's Brew Pub for beer after work, and then come home blushed and happy, and we'd launch into full party mode, breaking out the cocktails and playing loud 70's music on the stereo. Friends would start pouring in the door, often uninvited. Some guy named Roadkill started showing up regularly, and no one could figure out who he was or who knew him. I remember him reading us crass poetry and laughing, his toothless smile both cracking us up and scaring us a little.

I started frequenting bars downtown with all of my friends. It was one of those nights that I met Antonio.

He was unlike any other man I knew. He rode a motorcycle and had never gone to college. He was of Navajo, Chinese, and Mexican descent, but he claimed only that he was "American." He listened to rockabilly music and wore motorcycle boots every day.

I wanted to know him right away, to feel at home with him. I knew how to accomplish that feeling for myself, and I thought I could do the same for him. I ordered us a Flaming Volcano, a big bowl of mixed liquor with fruit juice and a small cup in the middle filled with wax, which the bartender lit on fire as he brought the massive drink to our table.

Later I kissed him in the parking lot, and invited him to my house. I drove home drunk, going through the motions and making my way through the deserted streets on instinct. That night we slept curled up on my futon mattress on the brown shag carpet, and the old electric coil heater glowed orange on and off like a neon sign. It was February in the South Valley, and outside it smelled of smoldering juniper wood.

By mid-May, the electric coil heater had burned out, and it was warm enough outside to keep my bedroom window open. The juniper outside my window had berries on it already, frosted blue ones that hung off the tips of the scaly branches and smelled like gin. With the window open and the gin breeze coming in, I packed my clothes and books and prepared to move. I was moving again, this time to the North Valley, where Tony and I had rented a brown adobe house tucked away in a lush little area with a horse pasture and big cottonwood trees.

The house was true adobe, constructed by our landlord, with 18-inch thick walls, rough wood molding around the door and window frames, and a brick floor that felt cool on the soles of my feet. Just inside the front door was a stained glass skylight, and the kitchen to the left had handmade wood and brick countertops. There were large picture windows in all of the rooms. The screen door near the kitchen also led to a patio with rounded adobe walls that curved around in an arc off the house.

We got all of our wine from Ponderosa Winery. It was usually our destination on our weekend motorcycle trips to the Jemez Mountains. We'd stop at a little white house in the tiny town of Ponderosa and sit inside at the wine-tasting counter. The owners were always there and would pour us samples of every wine we asked for.

Sometimes I bought a glass and walked outside, my head heavy from the sugar and alcohol, contented and warm in the sun among the orange dirt and grapevines. We'd buy four bottles and put them in the saddle bags, wrapping them in Tony's extra t-shirt and rags so they wouldn't clank together. Then we'd be off again, speeding and leaning into curves, the feel of sun and wind against our arms.

As the summer desert heat began to let up again toward mid-October, I witnessed my second Balloon Fiesta, and this time I had a front row seat. Each morning of fiesta I awoke at my usual 5:30 am to the hissing and glowing of balloons

hovering just above my tiny backyard. They barely missed the treetops in the valley, and sometimes the passengers would peer out of their baskets and wave at me, standing in my robe with my head tilted back to watch them.

That month I started my new job at an outdoor school in the Sandias, a forty-five minute drive from my house in the valley. Every morning I drove up Tramway, a two-lane road hugging the northernmost stretches of Albuquerque and dividing the upper-middle class Heights neighborhood from the more upscale Foothills neighborhood to the east of town. I looked forward to my morning drive through Tijeras canyon, between the Sandia and the Manzano Mountains, and then north into Cedar Crest. I sipped coffee, listened to public radio, and watched the clouds hanging in the crags and points of the barren mountainsides. And everyday at work I had the pleasure of teaching ten-year olds about the mysteries of the mountains that frame their desert city, often taking kids for their very first hike through the vanilla-scented Ponderosa and Douglas Fir forests.

My relationship with Tony ended that following winter, and I moved back to the less-expensive South Valley, into my own tiny house just beyond the west bank of the Rio Grande.

My job began to lose its novelty. Both of my closest friends had moved away, and I was left with my friend Alicia from work, with whom I would take long walks on the weekends in the Sandias or along the Rio Grande. We let our dogs, my one and her four, run wild and explore their ancestral roots as a pack in the bosque, the woods along the river. Alicia taught me all about the plants of the area, instructing me on their medicinal uses and natural histories, and sometimes she'd share a hit or

two from her bowl. The smoke left us blurry-eyed and giggling, and I had trouble making the drive home afterward without losing my way a few times.

Alicia left the outdoor school that summer, and moved to the Gila Wilderness of southwest New Mexico with her boyfriend, her dogs, and her ukulele and banjo in tow. I was happy for her, that she would find what she wanted there off the grid, able to wander the hills and hidden rivers as she pleased. But I was mostly alone, and I felt it deeply.

I had been dating my friend Chris for a couple months at that point. I had always felt comfortable with Chris, and had cried to him on several occasions when I was very drunk, once in the middle of Gold Avenue in downtown Albuquerque, overcome with intoxicated grief over the loss I felt deep inside me. I cried for the child I'd given little consideration to giving birth to a year before.

The alcohol stinging its way through my veins and thinning my blood seemed to burn a hole inside me for that child, and I cried for him over and over, but only when I was drunk. Chris always listened quietly and then hugged me close to him.

Chris was tall and attractive, with black hair and electric blue eyes set off by long, curled lashes. He was one year younger than I, smart, cynical, and very into his form of indie style and culture. He was a drinker, a daily consumer of cocktails with premium liquor or dark beers. He and I fed off each other's interest in drinking.

That summer I arrived at work hungover many times, and a couple of times called in sick so that Chris and I could stay in bed all morning. Those mornings I pulled back the curtain on my bedroom window, so I could watch the growing intensity of the sun on my neighbor's adobe wall, leafy grape vines clinging to the rough brown surface. Chris would massage my sore neck, tying to work out the

painful knot at the base of my skull that grew more painful and dense each time I drank.

When Chris and I had our tarot cards read one day outside the natural foods co-op, the tarot reader told me that I had something growing inside me, an idea waiting to be born. She said that I should follow it no matter what people say, and that many people will not understand it but I should keep pursuing it anyway. She told Chris that he would not be with me in that endeavor and that his outlook was not as bright. We laughed nervously at how she seemed to feel no need to please us both with her predictions, but her face remained sober.

I took her predictions to heart mostly because I was already convinced that I should follow my instincts and pursue my new interests. I started quietly contemplating when I might be able to leave my job at the outdoor school and move back to Tennessee to stay with my parents until I found a new internship or job. But I didn't mention my plans to anyone.

The phone rang just as I crawled into bed, early for a change, so I could get enough sleep for work the next day. I answered, and it was Chris on the other line. He was crying, and it alarmed me.

"What's wrong, Chris, what's going on?" I asked calmly, trying to settle him.

"I don't know...I think I'm having a panic attack or something. I feel like I'm having a heart attack! My hear is racing so fast...my arm is numb, too. And I can't breathe right... Please come over."

"Okay, I'll be there in a minute. You're okay, just try to take some slower breaths, and I'll be right there."

I got dressed, threw on some shoes, and drove out of the valley, across the river, and toward the university neighborhood where he lived. Chris had been having trouble sleeping lately. We had started taking long walks through his neighborhood at night to try to calm him some, and I made sure to take him to the city park nearby, where dozens of large cottonwoods grew and shaded the irrigated green grass. It was partly instinctual to me to look for solace and comfort in natural surroundings, and it seemed to help him, too, at least for the moments we were in the park.

That night I was able to comfort him enough for him to fall asleep in his bed, and I got home very late and collapsed in my own, just in time to be awakened by my alarm to go to work. Nights like those came more and more often in the next month. Sometimes I would bring over a six pack of beer in hopes that it might help, mainly for myself, to ease the growing tension and uneasiness welling up inside me. But the beer seemed to have lost its edge for me, and just a few wouldn't do much.

One night that summer, Chris called me and told me he had something important to say. He said that he was going into rehab and that he would be gone for a couple of months at least. The word rang in my head, "Rehab??" I asked him, "For what? Alcohol? Chris, you're not an alcoholic, you just need to get your life figured out more, and maybe get on some kind of anti-anxiety medication to help until you feel better about things."

Chris didn't budge. He said he was going to rehab because he has addiction problems period. He said he had cycled through periods of alcohol, cocaine, and speed abuse, and he needed help to stop the cycles. He ended the phone call telling me he couldn't talk to me anymore for a while.

I was shocked. I thought he'd gone mad. Why any normal 24-year old guy would commit himself to rehab for things he'd used years ago, I could not understand.

And he was breaking up with me, for what reasons I couldn't surmise either. A well of fear and loneliness opened up in my belly, and I needed to fill it.

While my experiences in Outward Bound years ago had taught me that my very sanity and wholeness is dependent on maintaining a close relationship with the natural world, it had not taught me how to deal with the terror of feeling alone like that.

After Chris went away to rehab, I finally stopped my pleading phone calls to him and my begging him to see me again. I continued to go to work every day, and I spent the weekends hiking with my dog in the mountains during the day and watching movies at home at night. But to ease this growing fear and loneliness, I started making it a habit to stop at a liquor store on the way home from work, to buy a six pack of beer or a bottle of wine. I tried to make it an adventure, sampling new kinds of beer and different local wines.

Soon the frat boys that worked at the liquor store stopped asking for my ID. They remembered me, and they started asking me to tell them about all the different types of beer and which I liked the best. At first, I was kind of flattered to know that I was an expert on beer and wine. But after a while, I started to wonder about myself.

I felt worse physically then I had in a long time, and the knot on my neck began to radiate pain down through my left shoulder and into my shoulder blade. I felt sore much of the time, and I got headaches often that wouldn't go away until my evening drinks soothed them.

I gave myself every excuse in the book. I never drank before 5 pm, never hid liquor in my car or at work or anywhere, and I never *ever* drank in the morning to ease a hangover. I rarely had more than a few beers or a bottle of wine at once, and I

could usually stop there without feeling the need to go out and get more if I ran out. But I didn't recognize that those things did not have to be the case for me to be an alcoholic. No one sat down and explained it all to me, and even if they had, I may not have gotten it. I was feeding an addiction, diving deeper and deeper into it, and losing touch with the world outside my own head.

That following October, I packed up my car for the trip east to Tennessee. It was again the week of Balloon Fiesta, my third year in New Mexico, and I drove to the North Valley one last time to watch the balloons rise above me, up over the Rio Grande and the dry, rocky land around. I said goodbye to it all under my breath, a small prayer of thanks for the chance to live in this place, if only for a short time. I was numb the day I drove away, through Tijeras Canyon in the early morning glow of pink granite and the smoke from fireplaces. I watched for the last time as low clouds flowed like a waterfall over the rocky cliffs in the canyon.

At my parents' house in Tennessee, I started talking to Chris on the phone as soon as he got out of rehab. One night I called him, sobbing, a darkness in my brain so huge I felt it was inescapable.

"I don't know if you are ready to hear this, Allison, but I can tell you how I do it, how I get through every day without crying or without panic attacks. I can tell you but it's up to you how you want to deal with it yourself."

"Yes, tell me. I will listen, whatever it is," I was desperate, drunk on cheap white wine, and had been crying on the floor of my bedroom for an hour straight.

"Alright," he chuckled a little, "But I'm not sure how you're going to take this." Chris proceeded to tell me that there is something or someone out there that loves me unconditionally. The voice inside myself that tells me to take care of

myself, respect myself, is that something, and when we get separated from that something, that is when depression comes over us. No matter how we try to fill that hole, that void left in us, with a lover, with sex, friends, hobbies, alcohol, drugs, it can never be filled. He called it a "God-sized hole" within us that can't be filled with anything else.

At first I found it strange and amusing that Chris, once so cynically atheist, would be telling me this. And I felt a pang of my own cynicism creeping up in me, like the alarm bell in my head when I see a television evangelist or hear people talk of being "saved." But after thinking about it a while alone, I was able to apply what he said to my own experience, particularly to the moment of wholeness and clarity I had during my solo experience in Outward Bound.

I knew Chris was right. Spirituality is fundamental to my own happiness and wholeness. I had realized that when I was alone, deep in the forest of North Carolina, almost four years ago. It was not only understanding my role as a part of the greater living world, but understanding my own nature, my body, my most basic needs and desires, and being true to them. I had tried to make the realization conscious in my mind that the emptiness that I sometimes feel, especially when living in a place where I do not feel connected to my environment or my neighbors, cannot be filled with alcohol or night clubs or even with relationship after relationship with men.

So if I had realized that almost four years ago, why wasn't I able to heed my own advice?

I thought back on my life in New Mexico, and I also remembered that the only times I drew or painted or wrote for my personal enjoyment was when I was not actively drinking. I had only been without a boyfriend there for a month or so at a time, and when I lost one, I acted quickly to get another one and settle into a new life

of security with that person. I had never felt comfortable alone, except when I was outside the city, hiking in the mountains or the desert. I found the landscape that I loved more than any other, yet I didn't let its power fill me or its wisdom instruct me. I was filling my emptiness with something that just made the hole bigger.

Chris' comments stayed with me. As I sat outside in the early April sun of my parents' backyard, the one I grew up playing in and learning about animals and forming my morals and passions in, I came to see patterns of avoidance in my life. I had found certain comfortable mechanisms for dealing with the stress of living and surviving daily in an often unkind and apathetic world, and now I needed to break those patterns.

I lay flat on the cool earth, soaking up the warmth of the spring sun, and asking the vital energy within the earth to reenter me and heal me. And I knew deep inside me that I would return to New Mexico again, this time alone. Somewhere in the future, I could see that there would be no room for alcohol or codependent relationships, as my God-sized hole would surely be filled one day by that thirsty land a thousand miles away.

Writing a New Ending

It was a Friday evening, February 27, 2004, when eleven-year-old boys Justin and Frankie stumbled through a snowy Montana field, dizzy and blurry-eyed, the toxic stink of vodka seeping through their pores. The two boys had skipped the last half of school that day and met their friend Tyson outside in a shelter of juniper and ponderosa pines, near an open field. One of the boys had a plastic half-gallon bottle of vodka, and the three boys chugged the vodka as they sat amongst the trees. They had poked a hole in the side of the bottle to allow the liquor to run down their throats faster when they tipped it to their mouths. Tyson eventually grew tired of the other two hogging the vodka, so he headed home after a couple of hours and passed out drunk in his bed. But Frankie and Justin continued to drink.

After a little while longer of talking and taking huge gulps of the vodka, Frankie and Justin stashed the bottle between two trees, hidden from initial sight, and began to walk across the empty fields and ditches, apparently toward Justin's house about a half-mile away. Frankie, whose blood alcohol level was creeping up toward 0.5 percent, collapsed in the snow, a note from his teacher to his father still tucked under his arm. Justin knelt by Frankie and tried to wake him, but he wasn't able. So Justin, whose blood alcohol level was rising above 0.2 percent, walked on about two hundred feet and then collapsed himself.

Frankie died that afternoon, having poisoned his small body with alcohol in extremely high concentrations. Justin died that evening from a combination of alcohol poisoning and exposure to the below-freezing temperatures, to which his cotton pants and sweatshirt were of no comfort. That night, as the boys lay dead in the field, toxic levels of alcohol having slowed and then stopped the function of their

body organs, the temperature dropped into the 20's and a dusting of snow fell for several hours on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Western Montana.

A few months earlier, Justin Benoist's fourteen-year-old brother Tyler had died from smoke inhalation when he was passed out drunk in an abandoned trailer after a day of partying with friends. Justin had looked up to his brother as a hero, and their mother Norma said that Justin had not been the same since Tyler's death. Justin and Tyler had been very young children when their dad, Phillip, also fell prey to alcohol abuse and committed suicide during a drunken binge nine years earlier.

The night before Justin and Frankie drank vodka near the open field, Justin had been out late partying with friends, and had sent his mother into a panic trying to find him. Norma had called the police to report Justin missing, only to have him amble in soon after. But the next day, a few months after his older brother's death, Justin, too, was dead.

Frankie, who was the smaller boy, had met his friend Justin at school, where they played basketball together. Frankie was an avid sports fan and player, and he shared his dad's love of golf. Frankie's dad was raising him and his half-brother alone. Frankie and his brother had gotten in trouble with their dad recently, when they had both snuck out of the house in the middle of the night to go to a party where kids and young teens were drinking. When his dad confronted him, Frankie apologized profusely for letting him down.

The deaths of the two young boys, preceded by Justin's brother Tyler, and soon followed by the alcohol-related death of 15-year-old Joey DuMontier in May, 2004, not only affected the lives of their immediate family and friends. The deaths of these young boys shocked the entire Flathead Reservation. The Salish and Kootenai

tribal council and community leaders' heads were left spinning with the meaning of their deaths, wondering how they had let down their people, fearing that they had not done all they could have done to prevent their youth from harming and killing themselves.

I sat at the large oak dining room table where I was housesitting for the summer of 2004, in the North Side community of Missoula. It was Sunday morning, July 18, the sun streamed in the east-facing window, and the corners of my Sunday *Missoulian* curled up with the warm breeze. I sipped coffee and read the oversized title of the front page "Frozen tears," and I read that "the alcohol related deaths of two 11-year-olds on a snowy field near Ronan last February brought home the grim reality - and desire for escape - that many Indian children face." I wondered how the news had entirely escaped me when the boys had died five months earlier. I must have been so caught up in my own world of graduate school and work that I missed the news of the boys' deaths and the discussions and community meetings that had proceeded them.

Horrified at the death of the boys, I read the article and the rest of the series of articles that appeared in the newspaper for the following week. I read them several times over, in partial disbelief. And I felt the pain of their families, their community, and the larger community of which we are all a part, for the reality that we *do* live in such a world where these things happen, not just once, but over and over again.

It is a common view that American Indian and Alaskan Native (AI/AN) people have much higher rates of alcohol use and abuse than other ethnic groups. The stereotype of the "drunk Indian" is still prevalent in our society, despite the fact that

alcoholism and alcohol abuse affect us all. According to a 2000 study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration Center, the percentage of current drinkers, or those who have consumed alcoholic beverages in the last month, is lower for AI/AN (35%) and African American (34%) people than for Hispanics (40%) and for Caucasians (51%). So, in reality, there is a much larger percentage of AI/AN people who abstain from alcohol than Caucasians, although the common perception among non-Indians is probably flipped.

The percentage of AI/AN youth ages 12-17 who are current drinkers (19%) is similar to the percentage of Caucasian youth (18%). However, past the age of 26, the percent rate of heavy alcohol users is highest among AI/AN at 7.4%, and it is increasing with time, while the severe use rates of other ethnic groups seems to be more stable. And AI/AN males ages 25-34 are seven times more likely to suffer from alcohol-related problems, such as cirrhosis of the liver, than non-Indians. Three times more AI/AN males die from car crashes, and they are twice as likely to commit suicide as non-Indian males. Both car crashes and suicide are often related to alcohol use. Fetal Alcohol Syndrome is also much higher among AI/AN populations.

It is clear that some AI/AN people have problems associated with alcohol use and abuse, but many of the rest of us do, too. It is my gut feeling that this self-destruction is not natural for us humans, in the sense that we may be looking for something to help or console us at but end up in patterns of self-harm and addiction instead. And reading the stories of the Salish and Kootenai boys who died in Ronan recently began my investigation into the deep, root causes of our common human desire for mind-altering substances, particularly for alcohol, which was also my own substance of choice for years.

While I understand there are risks involved in addressing alcohol use among American Indians, as a white American without deep knowledge of cultures other than my own, I feel that there is much more danger in not addressing the problem. I do not pretend to know the answers to alcohol abuse for any culture, but I do have an interest in learning, in opening myself up to new possibilities for my own healing, and in offering my knowledge and experience to help others in any way I can.

It may be due to my early connections with the natural world, or even due partly to my training in ecology and interconnections among all living and nonliving things, that when I look for the sources of social problems, I examine the health of our earth's communities through a much larger lens. First, I see our planet as a whole suffering from rampant deforestation, pollution and contamination, and devastating loss of the diversity of species. I then see that we humans, as integral parts of these living and nonliving communities, are suffering from the losses and the degradation just as we are responsible for the losses.

We not only suffer from polluting the water we drink and bathe in, the air we breathe, and the food we eat, but we suffer from the overall disconnect between our lives and the things that sustain us. For example, while our ancestors lived much closer to their food and water sources, and depended on an intimate knowledge of and spiritual connection to the earth around them, we continue to separate ourselves further and further from our sources of bodily and emotional nourishment.

We get our water from the kitchen sink or plastic bottles. We shop for our food indoors, where the food has often been shipped thousands of miles and packaged and refined before we even purchase it. We transport ourselves from temperature-controlled homes to indoor work areas in vehicles, and we spend our evenings watching television or movies inside alone or just with our nuclear families. We

reduce our immediate connections with the living world around us and isolate ourselves from our extended human communities.

Are these changes just a normal evolution of human beings? I don't think so, because we have not actually *evolved* much at all since the beginning of the industrial revolution a few hundred years ago, when our lives started changing more drastically than ever. We have the same chemical and biological makeup in our bodies, many of the same emotional and spiritual needs as we always have. But our worlds have changed enormously. Therefore, as I see it, and as the emerging field of ecopsychology maintains, we have certain physical and spiritual needs that are not being met in our modern worlds. Not only are these needs not being met, but we have experienced a collective emotional trauma from such dramatic changes taking place so quickly, before our bodies have had a chance to change, or evolve, along with the manipulated world around us.

This trauma, I believe, is a reality, though it may seem far-fetched for people who are not used to looking at the world in this way. It makes sense to me: we are animals who have been taken out of our traditional homes and ways of life, placed in strange, artificial environments, and expected to not only adjust but to thrive, despite also being disconnected on a daily basis from the things that once sustained us physically and spiritually. And when we get cues that something is not right, that our lives are not fulfilling, that we are sad far too often, that we are incapable of having balanced relationships with people, behaviors, or substances, we are expected to remedy everything with yet another superficial cure.

We are told that we need medications to balance our bodies and brain chemistries, cosmetics to feel better about ourselves, better clothes or cars or homes, the next or latest gadget to entertain ourselves. It is no wonder that we become

addicted to the things we are offered by our society that do give us some relief, like alcohol for instance, because we are also taught to seek a quick fix, a pill or a new item to buy or consume, rather than evaluating the health of our communities on a larger scale and the appropriateness of our responses to the problems in our environment. Is it not possible that certain problems in our human communities like depression and addictions are actually symptoms of living in an unbalanced and unhealthy world?

The case of American Indians and Alaskan Natives having higher rates of suicide and alcohol abuse and the research I've done on these problems further strengthen my resolve that such issues may be due in part to a collective trauma that has not healed. In their book *Native American Postcolonial Psychology*, Eduardo and Bonnie Duran describe the suffering that began when natives had first contact with European colonials and continued through what became a period of devastating loss. Many have written about the damage that is due to the catastrophic changes in indigenous worldviews, lifestyles, and natural environments. The aftermath from the genocide and brutality of indigenous peoples by Europeans also includes psychological and societal problems comparable to those seen in refugees and victims of concentration camps.

Duran and Duran explain that most of the current literature addressing the prevalence of alcoholism, in particular, in AI/AN communities often cite the socio-cultural issues and barriers to recovery such as poverty, mental illness, personality characteristics of native people, and treatment outcomes of recovery efforts. Such literature may make it sound like academic failure, poverty, and conflict within AI/AN communities are separate from the current and historical mistreatment of indigenous peoples by European colonials and the U.S. government. I would add that

the separation from the daily practical and spiritual connections with their ancestral environments must not be ignored as a major cause of psychological trauma to AI/AN peoples.

People of European descent have undergone similar traumas to their once earth-based lives and spiritualities. It's just that the major trauma of their separation from such lives began much longer ago, as in thousands of years, and they may have had more time to adjust psychologically in that time, rather than the scant one or two hundred years that AI/AN peoples have had since their major separation from the earth. African American people were also forcibly separated from their lives and ancestral lands, continually brutalized, and then expected to assimilate into the already set society of those that dominated and enslaved them. To ignore such trauma to their collective psychology and that of our society as a whole would also be a mistake.

I must make the disclaimer here that lumping all AI/AN peoples, all European peoples, and all African Americans together in large groups is drastically underestimating the vast differences among nations, tribes, communities, etc. I only do so to make the point that there are in fact certain universal truths among human beings that should not be ignored. We all came from ancestors that lived lives that were more intimately connected to the rhythms and cycles of the natural world around them, and very few of us live that way anymore. We couldn't even if we wanted to. And because of that, we have suffered and continue to suffer.

We can't change history, so what can we do now to address the suffering going on in our society and in our smaller tribes and communities? Solving the particular problem of alcohol abuse among American Indians and Alaska Natives has been an issue of concern for researchers, psychologists, and community members for

some time. Duran and Duran address some of these concerns. They explain that, compared to the dominant cultural values of individual rights and responsibility, AI/AN cultures are based more on consensus and collective responsibility. This difference could be a barrier to AI/AN recovery from alcohol abuse in the sense that most recovery programs are created by and for the dominant culture's values. Therefore, the typical twelve-step models of Alcoholics Anonymous and most other treatment alternatives may not be suitable for many AI/AN people. While some may benefit greatly from such a model, others continue to fail at recovery, and possibly end up worse than before because they have been told that AA is the only answer.

The disease model of alcohol addiction may not be helpful to understanding reasons for native drinking habits in that it places the blame of the addiction solely on the physical body makeup, ignoring cultural and social factors involved in the actual reasons people sought out relief and began drinking in the first place. By just saying that AI/AN people's bodies are susceptible to becoming addicted to alcohol, we don't consider the pain or the drive to seek out and pursue alcohol in the first place. Nor do we explain the cases of those who do drink or have drunk in the past but do not abuse alcohol.

Duran and Duran offer another possible contributing cause for the habitual use of alcohol among many native people as the need to somehow fulfill their identity as true American Indians. Because it has become such a widespread, overbearing assignment to their cultural identities as American Indians, many, particularly youth and those of mixed heritage, may begin drinking at least partly as a way to show that they are in fact true Indians. Furthermore, we could also look at the possibility that drinking, especially among AI/AN youth, may begin as an act of rebellion against the dominant society that all but destroyed their cultures. And what is sometimes viewed

as the failure to control alcohol use or recover from alcohol abuse might actually be their resistance to control by the dominant culture.

It may also be that the dominant culture's answers to the problems of alcohol abuse may not be appropriate for many people of indigenous ancestry. Their particular tribes or groups may need to asses their own needs and address them on their own, as a community. According to an article published in 1988 in the *Journal of Rural Community Psychology*, the Alkali Lake band of Shuswap Native Americans from British Columbia reduced its own rate of alcoholism from 95% to 5% in ten years. They did so by changing the culture of their community into one that no longer tolerated alcoholism as an individual behavior, while also bringing back into everyday use many of their traditional cultural practices.

And what about those who do find success in the twelve-step model offered by groups like Alcoholics Anonymous? They may be able to recover due to the added connections they form with other people and their communities. The act of going to meetings, connecting with people, and hearing their stories could fulfill a need for community and human connection, therefore making the shift away from alcohol abuse more possible. The spiritual component of twelve-step groups could also be a reason for their success with certain people. These groups ask you to contemplate your own "higher power" and to accept that power into your life, which may also address a need for spirituality that many people in our society today are lacking.

The human needs for connecting to people through stories and community and the need for spiritual growth could arguably be applied to people of any ethnic or cultural background. They are needs that have been largely ignored by many of us in the industrialized world today, leaving holes in our psychological well-being that are difficult to figure out how to fill. When we try to fill them with substances like

alcohol, we may feel better immediately, but we open up much larger holes that we have to try to mend later on in our lives. The case is the same for all of us. The tools for recovery, however, may be as different and varied as we are culturally and individually. We must be flexible in our understanding and creative in our recommendations for healing ourselves and people from different backgrounds.

It was over a year ago now that Frankie and Justin died in that field in Ronan, Montana, from pouring huge amounts of cheap vodka into their eleven-year-old bodies. And despite the research and reading I have done in the meantime, on alcohol use and abuse by youth and by American Indians, ecopsychology, traditional psychology and addiction recovery, I still find myself wondering why. Why did they do it? Why do we do it? And why do we act like there's nothing wrong with it?

Reading their story changed me. It made me look at myself and my own reasons for drinking in way that I had not been able to since I had my first drink ten years before. I had to ask myself why I still drank, despite my moral belief that the purchase and use of alcohol contributes to the harm of our communities, that it sets a bad example for our youth, and that it damages my body and chips away at my self-worth. These thoughts made me conscious again of my drinking patterns, and I discovered that, even though it may not be apparent to those around me, I had a drinking problem. It didn't matter whether or not a psychologist or a twenty-question test would deem me an alcoholic, and it didn't matter whether or not I even was an alcoholic. I simply needed to stop drinking, and I knew it.

The realization sat with me for another six months of reading, thinking, and planning my strategy and my quitting date. During that time, I watched myself as if I were on the outside my own body. I could clearly see in myself the signs of alcohol

abuse and dependence. And finally, on December 25, 2004, I had my last drink. Although I quit for a period of time five years earlier, this time it was much more difficult. But now I have the stories of others tucked away in my heart to remind me of why I no longer drink, and now I can offer to others my own story.

What I believe to be true for the American Indian and alcohol is also true for countless others of us and alcohol, drugs, gambling, shopping, pornography, television, internet, and other attempts at meeting our complex human desires for community, connection, and wholeness. We need to write a new version of our roles in the world, how we treat each other, and what we are doing to more-than-human nature. As it is not easy to overcome such obstacles in ourselves, the charge for conquering them on larger scale may seem insurmountable. But I remain hopeful.

I take to heart these words of Tony Incashola, head of the Salish Cultural Committee, "This story has grown old. We've lived it for too long. Alcohol wasn't a part of the Indian story in the beginning, but we've watched as it has come to dominate us. It's time to fight back, to tell a new story...We have to write a new ending, one where hope and health win the day. It's time to write."

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